

A Meditation on Railroading

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No Archive Warnings Apply

Category:

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Character:

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Additional Tags:

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Collections:

Jason and Tim Enemy-to-Caretaker, Good Readings (ymmv), tim drake-centric fics, Tim Drake and Red Robin Stories, The best of the bats, Veryace's favorite fics, Tim Drake and the Bats, Kit's favorite Batfam stuff, S.T.I.L.L., Made me cry like a b, Leymonaide fic recs, Makes Me Cry, A Picky Vest's Favorites, I read it once and I'll read it again, Ashes' Library, Batfamily Love, The Batfamily 2022 Collection, (Some of) Tara's Favorite Works, actual most favorite fics ever (compiled only because i cannot bring myself to choose a number one)), Tim Drake is Beloved, Squiggle's Supurb Fics, Bat Babes and Babies, Purple Archivist: Read and Read Again, Works So Good Id Physically Buy the Hard Cover Version in Stores, Dantalion's Library, an older sister's fav sibling fics, The Batfam Fanfic Survey, Good fics, Protective / Big Bro Jason Todd,

Qqqqqq115, Psychogeek top picks, Tim Drake, Selected Best Reads, Fvcking LOVE These Fics, BOTB__Best_Of_The_Batfam, Give the batfamily the happiness they deserve, The Best of Tim Drake, Fics that deserve a podfic, November God Favs, Carefully Curated Works of Art, my heart is here, fics i will read for ever and ever and ever and ever, fics to browse and read again, Complicatedly Ever After, liliegrayson bat favs, Library, Finished Fanfiction, Emmas_Recs, tim drake fics I will hoard in my brain for all eternity, Purrsonal Picks, Favorite Fics of 2022, gayee's dc favs, and i held the softest of smiles in my hands, Batfam fics I'd jump into the Lazarus pit for, ❖❖Wan Shi Tong's Library❖❖, The Bats' 10/10 Would Read Again, jason todd and the bats, Wdym this isn't dc canon, saviors of aerox :>, Tim Drake Is Deranged (affectionate), ❖❖addictive fics❖❖, Batfam and co., hello yes i can't stop thinking about these works, fics to fics my anxiety, Fics I enjoy, batsy for Bats, Hypercompetent But Emotional Trainwreck Tim Drake, fics that keep me up at 3am on a school night, bruce wayne needs a chai

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A Meditation on Railroading

by [eggmacguffin](#)

Summary

When he ends up ditched in Atlanta after a fight with his dad, Tim decides to do the only sensible thing: Tell no one and make the 800 mile journey back to Gotham on his own.

Because the "call Batman when you're in trouble" rule only applies when he's Robin, right?

Notes

Here I go again

Atlanta

Chapter Summary

In which Tim doesn't finish his soup, doesn't read a book, and doesn't ask for help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tim propped his chin on his hand, taking a wild stab at casual, and tried to ignore all the *looks* aimed at their table. Kept his eyes glued to his phone. Tried not to listen as his father berated the server over his chicken being served with the wrong sauce, a real *but that's what it says on the menu sir vs well only a moron would prepare the dish that way* sort of dance, loud and rude and in the middle of a crowded restaurant and Tim could just *die*.

And the thing was. It was *nice* of his dad to take him on a trip to Atlanta. They'd been at odds lately, for reasons Tim knew for a fact were his own fault, and this was an actual, honest attempt to reach out. A week-long vacation, just the two of them. An opportunity to bond and reconnect.

Tim hadn't expected the trip to actually happen. He'd resigned himself to that cold, familiar dread, waiting for something else to come up, for his dad to cancel at the last minute; it had seemed too good to be true. But fall break had ticked closer and closer with no change in plans, and Tim was left scrambling to pack the night before, almost giddy with excitement.

They'd made it a road trip, setting out at the crack of dawn. Their breath was foggy in the early morning chill, and they had split an enormous thermos of hot, black coffee between the two of them. It had been intimate and quaint and familial, and had bolstered his mood for the remainder of the morning. His good cheer was catching, apparently, because his dad had forgone his usual complaints to share stories about growing up in Atlanta between sips of coffee, laughing at his own jokes and smiling at Tim's wry input.

Jack didn't even comment on the fact that Tim was currently scraping together the itinerary he'd been asked to prepare a week ago, even though he *must* have noticed. That had been fun too, finding and

planning cool stuff for the two of them to do together. And while they hadn't exactly stuck to his list to the *letter* (such as the French bistro they currently found themselves in, rather than the little Italian place Tim had selected), it wasn't about that. Tim knew that wasn't the point.

He should be grateful. Making scenes in restaurants was just what parents did, right? He'd probably be more used to it if he'd been to more restaurants with parents. Head still ducked, cheeks prickling with embarrassment, he quietly skimmed the Wikipedia page for pickling salt. He was sending a screenshot of a particularly befuddling diagram of *Lactobacillus* to Dick, just for something to distract himself with, when the server, a plump, friendly teenager with bright eyes and dimples, began to cry.

And that was as far as Tim was willing to stand. "Dad!" He hadn't said it loudly, exactly, but with the way heads swiveled toward him and locked on, he might as well have shouted. Tim wilted slightly under his dad's furious gaze, but held his ground. "Dad," he tried again, "This behavior is entirely unacceptable. I understand that you're unhappy with the food, but this isn't accomplishing anything."

"The only thing I am trying to *accomplish*," —Jack somehow said the word as though Tim had simultaneously used it incorrectly *and* just made it up—"is communicating to this young person here that I have no intention of paying for this meal." The smile he directed at Tim was brittle. "But if you love it here so much, why don't *you* foot the bill?"

Tim knew this dance. He was supposed to act alarmed at the idea, pretend to get flustered and say no. Then his dad would wave it off as *just kidding* and laugh knowingly with the server at Tim's expense. *Kids these days, so dependent. Guess he still needs his old man for something, right?*

Tim hated it. His dad thought it was hilarious.

Logically, Tim knew that playing along might help to de-escalate the situation. But looking at the smug expectancy on his father's face must have crossed a wire somewhere in Tim's brain, because what he *said* was a firm, unamused, "I left my wallet in the car, so I guess it's going to have to be you."

Even as the words were leaving his mouth, he *knew* he'd made a mistake.

Jack's chair clattered to the ground from the force with which he stood. The mocking smile on his face had frozen into something cold and hard.

"Get up," he snarled, curling a forceful hand around Tim's bicep and hauling him out of his seat. He stalked out of the restaurant, Tim stumbling to keep up, wincing at the painful grip.

Jack dragged him all the way into the alley behind the restaurant before letting go. "You think that little display was *cute*, boy?"

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking," Tim immediately apologized, throwing his hands up. "I wasn't trying to disrespect you; I answered you truthfully without considering the context of the conversation."

Jack looked somewhat mollified by this apology, which he should, because Tim practically had a doctorate in apologizing to people for stuff that wasn't his fault. He should start putting it on his resume.

With his dad cooling down, Tim decided to press his luck. "So, this place was a bust. Why don't we just pay and get out of here, go check out the...um, museum or something?" he asked hopefully, but Jack was already shaking his head.

"It's the principle of the matter, Tim," he stated firmly. "You can't just let people walk all over you." Carefully ignoring the hypocritical irony of *that* particular lesson, Tim stared at his father. *Really* looked at him.

"You don't have your wallet either," he said slowly, "do you?"

Immediately, Jack's face burned beet red. "I...uh..." he trailed off. Unbelievable.

"What's the matter with you?" Tim exploded. "That was insanely inappropriate. You made that poor girl *cry* over—"

Jack backhanded him across the face. The shock of it, the suddenness of it, prevented Tim from either dodging or reacting like a normal kid would; as it was, he took it like a brick wall.

His dad, shaking out sore fingers, looked almost as surprised as Tim.

And the thing was. As Robin, he was no stranger to physical altercation; he'd taken countless harder hits from exponentially more capable opponents in the past. The ring on his dad's hand had barely clipped him enough to draw blood.

So why couldn't he shake it off? And why wasn't his dad *saying* anything?

The phone clenched in his fist chirped, breaking the tense silence and making them both jump. Tim glanced down robotically. Dick had responded; he swiped the notification away, looking back towards his father, but not quickly enough. Jack had already seen, and, vying to regain control of the conversation, latched onto the interruption with a particular fervor.

"You want to talk about inappropriate behavior, boy? What about you and that phone of yours?" Tim flinched, cursed himself for not expecting this. Cursed himself for not leaving his phone on the table, unfamiliar city be damned. Jack stepped into his space, crowding him. "Hand it over." Tim shook his head frantically. Jack sneered down at him. "I paid for it, didn't I? It doesn't belong to you; I *allow* you to have it. Now give it here." His tone left no room for argument.

Feeling a particular kind of helpless, Tim placed his phone carefully into his father's outstretched palm. It was all right, he told himself. His phone had two passcodes: one into his civilian cell and one for Robin, so he wasn't putting anyone's identities at risk. Still, Tim's fingers itched and his mind raced, trying to remember if he'd looked up or texted anything that might wind his dad up further, and cursed himself thricefold for not clearing his history more often.

Last time, his father had dug through his recent pages and found *how to tell if you like boys?* sandwiched between queries and articles for a chemistry paper.

Tim preferred to keep his civilian and vigilante lives as separate as possible, but the fallout from *that* particular misstep had left him sleeping at the Manor for about three weeks. Luckily, it had been around the time Red Hood had swanned into Gotham, so Bruce had been preoccupied enough with Jason's theatrics that Tim had gone more-or-less unnoticed.

But this time, Jack didn't demand the passcode and snidely read aloud whatever *dirt* he thought would best serve to shame Tim. Instead, shooting him a nasty glance, his dad hefted the phone, like he was going to *hurl it down the alleyway* and Tim instinctively lunged forward with a shout, because *his phone*, but he wasn't fast enough.

The device struck the pavement with a terrible *crack*.

Tim looked at his dad in askance, desperate for some sort of

explanation, but Jack just doubled down. “You spend too much time on that phone as it is,” he said impassively. “I know exactly what kinds of filth teenagers get exposed to on the internet; don’t think I don’t.” He sighed and pinched the skin between his eyebrows, as though warding off a headache. “I planned this trip for us, Tim, because *you said* you wanted to spend time together. But if you can’t be bothered to look up from your goddamn phone for two seconds of conversation, I don’t know why I bother.” His dad rubbed his sore hand again, muttering a faint curse under his breath. He threw one last furious glare Tim’s way before snapping, “I’m going to the car!”

With that, Jack turned his back to his son and stormed off without another word.

For an idiotic half-second, Tim actually considered following him. Luckily, he immediately recognized this as his father’s attempt to physically remove himself from the situation. A way to give them both time to cool off before continuing the argument.

Tim forced down the fury bubbling inside of him. There was no point in getting mad. It would just make things worse. The phone was smashed. He couldn’t *unsmash* it by mouthing off. The only thing he could do was get over it.

Maybe, when his dad came back, he’d apologize to Tim.

The demolished slab of sharp plastic went into his pocket. He took a deep breath to ground himself, and another, and another. When he looked up, his dad was nowhere in sight. Probably for the best.

With no other options presenting themselves, Tim wandered back inside, back to his table. When the server approached apprehensively, he waved her off with a smile, and said, “He forgot his wallet. He’s just gone to grab it from the car. Sorry about all the trouble.”

This place was fairly close to the parking garage, which was part of the reason Jack had insisted on it in the first place. It shouldn’t take long.

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, Tim was entirely unsurprised when the screen refused to turn on; he dropped it onto the table with a frustrated sigh. Looking past it, he found that his father’s chair had been righted, and the offending meal had been cleared away in their absence. To an uninformed observer, it might appear that Tim was here by himself, and always had been.

Suddenly no longer hungry, Tim pushed his half-finished soup away. He unhooked his camera bag from the back of the seat and clutched it protectively in his lap, finding comfort in the familiar weight. He ran through a few breathing exercises and resolutely did not meet any of the stares.

What must *they* think of him? His fingers tightened around his camera. Did they see him as a misbehaving child who'd been put in his place?

But wasn't that what had happened?

Honestly, these uppity tourists probably thought it was funny. He certainly felt like a punchline: Teen on phone argues with dad, they both leave, teen returns minus dad plus a smashed up phone. Like some shitty political cartoon. Didn't even need a caption. Environmental storytelling, right?

He clenched his eyes shut and focused on breathing.

"Hey, kid?" said a voice way too close to him. He jumped, eyes flying open to see a different employee crouching next to his chair. This one was older, mid twenties, and his expression was so painfully *understanding* that Tim couldn't hold his gaze for more than a few seconds.

Instead, he glanced at his watch, and discovered it had been almost twenty-five minutes since his dad had left. He shivered.

"I don't have my wallet," Tim whispered, like it was a secret.

"Don't worry about the meal, kid. It's on the house. Do you want anything? A glass of water, maybe? An ice pack?" The man very carefully did not touch him, instead pressing his hands flat against the table, well within Tim's line of sight.

"Don't need one; it probably won't bruise," Tim said absently.

A thought struck him, and he catalogued the man beside him, recontextualizing him with added suspicion. His body language was open and inviting; his face and words, friendly and approachable. His voice was deep, but soothing.

And something about the way he'd spoken...The familiar cadence of the words and tone. Tim had heard that tone before, and had employed it more than a couple of times himself. That, paired with the *assumption* that Tim was going to be sticking around, set off

immediate alarm bells in his head.

He snapped his head up, all business, and ignored his companion in favor of scanning the room with practiced efficiency. And...*there*.

A balding man with a fancy-looking nametag was huddled near a side door, talking low and fast into a corded phone and throwing surreptitious glances in Tim's direction. *Bingo*.

That was Tim's cue to get out of here.

"Thanks for comping the meal," Tim told the waiter, sliding the strap of his camera bag securely over his shoulder. "Sorry about the commotion. I really need to be going now." Whatever they *thought* was going on...it was just a fight with his dad. He didn't need anyone to get *involved*.

Before anyone could so much as call out to him, Tim had slipped through the front door of the restaurant and blended seamlessly into a passing crowd.

Tim hung with his group for a little while, watching the streets keenly, but there was no sign of anyone from the restaurant following him or looking for him. No cops, either.

He decided it was safe enough, and doubled back towards the car.

And it.

It was gone.

The car wasn't there. Jack wasn't there.

It didn't necessarily mean anything, of course. But as he stared at that empty block of pavement, fingers of that old, familiar dread crept up his spine.

He didn't have his wallet. He didn't have his phone. No cash, no ID, just his stupid camera. His dad wouldn't—

No. This was just a punishment. It had to be. His dad was back at the hotel, and was making Tim walk back. This was a punishment for mouthing off. That was all. A car roared past, buffeting him with crisp October air, and he shivered in his t-shirt.

Tim didn't even have his coat.

Tim left the parking garage feeling off, and tried in vain to convince himself that if he headed to the hotel, his dad would be waiting there.

But despite all evidence to the contrary, Tim was a smart boy. He knew better than to take that bet.

Moving stiffly, his usual grace absent, he wandered until his feet carried him to a branch of the public library, one he'd noticed in passing while sightseeing the day before.

He felt numb as he took the steps. Sat down at a computer. Checked his email.

Sitting pretty in his inbox was a receipt from a woman named Marcia, letting him know that the rest of his hotel reservation had been canceled successfully, but there would be a surcharge for checking out after 1pm. It was customary, she assured him.

Tim's head thunked sharply against the desk. His breathing became hoarse and ragged.

That was it, then. His dad had actually abandoned him. In an unfamiliar city. With no phone. No money. No forms of ID. No fucking coat.

Gotham was almost 800 miles away.

On autopilot, Tim snapped the face of his watch open, hooked a nail over the tiny thumb switch that would send an immediate distress signal to Batman, and...hesitated.

Was he really going to call down the Batman, at 3pm, to the middle of downtown Not-Gotham because he needed a *ride*? Not even as Robin, but as *Tim Drake*? There'd be so many questions, questions he'd have no idea how to answer.

What would he even *say* to Bruce when he got here? The very thought of telling him about the way Jack had behaved in that restaurant made Tim's chest burn with shame.

And with what happened to his phone...he squirmed in his seat. Jack wasn't the only one who admonished him for being on his phone too much.

What if Batman laughed at him? Well. He wouldn't laugh, but what if he made some sort of comment? What if he *smirked*?

"I'd literally rather kill myself," Tim said out loud, garnering a few startled looks from nearby patrons.

A final fear, worse than all the rest put together, stole the breath right out of him.

What if Bruce didn't come at all?

It was likely. Coming to pick Tim up by car was an almost three day round trip, and the Batplane was incredibly conspicuous. He'd most likely wire Tim the money for an airline ticket and make him come back by himself on a plane full of strangers. It was the logical thing to do. It was the fastest way to get home.

The very thought of it made Tim feel sick.

He didn't *want* to wait, he didn't want to sit around depending on adults and not *knowing* what was going to happen. He didn't want to wait for Batman to call him back, let him know what he was *allowed* to do, only to be digitally handed a fistful of cash and told to deal with it himself. He didn't want to spend one more moment in this *fucking city — and he didn't have to*, Tim realized.

It was like a bubble popped, letting the cloud of anger and helplessness and humiliation dissipate harmlessly into the air. He didn't have to call Batman at all.

Lost Robin Rule #2 states, in no uncertain terms, to contact Batman if he got into trouble.

Except.

This *wasn't* a Robin problem; this was a Tim Drake problem. It was always, always better to keep his two lives separate, he knew. It kept him from getting things mixed up in his head. Who cared about who, and so on.

There were no special rules for if *Tim Drake* was in trouble.

He didn't need Batman. He could figure this out on his own. He could handle this.

Mind made up, Tim snapped his watchface closed and got to his feet. He snagged a copy of *Anna Karenina* from a nearby display, and copy-pasted the first two-thirds of Wikipedia's plot summary into a fresh word document.

Just in case anyone came around asking questions.

Thirty minutes before the library was set to close, Tim was almost ready.

He ran through his meagre inventory for the final time. His camera. A half-pack of cinnamon gum. His watch. The schedules and maps he'd printed out. *Anna Karenina*.

There was one more thing he had, of course: Dick Grayson's email address. Dick wouldn't laugh at him for getting his phone broken. If he needed a ride, a short one, Dick would come get him personally. Dick loved Robin. Dick liked Tim. Dick could be trusted to not blab about it to Batman.

Dick,

My trip got cut short, so I'll be heading back into town a little sooner than expected. Everything's fine, but I'll be in Bludhaven sometime in the next couple of days and was wondering if you could give me a ride back to Gotham?

-Tim

P.S. Phone charger broke so I can't text.

That done, Tim gathered his effects, popped a stick of gum into his mouth, and stepped out into the night.

Chapter End Notes

This story deals with themes of parental gaslighting. Tags will be added as the story progresses.

Charlotte

Chapter Summary

In which Tim cries it out, eats some fruit, and bumps into an old friend.

Chapter Notes

This chapter took so many tries to get right. I hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was something special about city streets at night.

Atlanta was better lit than Gotham, and the air was clearer, and the traffic was worse, but the basic concept remained the same.

That feeling of standing at the bottom of the world, looking up. The sensation of feeling simultaneously insignificant and feeling like a part of something huge and enormous and thriving.

Tim loved it. He'd always loved it.

And of course, there was something heartrendingly familiar about wandering a looming cityscape at dusk in jeans and sneakers with a camera around his neck, his cheeks rosy from the cold. No parents, no big empty house to swallow him. It was the only kind of alone that Tim had ever *craved* as a kid, the only kind he'd actively seek out. Because he wasn't alone; no matter how well the shadows obscured him from sight, there was nowhere the thrum and pulse of a city alive could not be found.

Finding it now, feeling the city's heart beat through the soles of his shoes? Feeling her breath, thick with laughter and conversation and cigarette smoke, whistling through his hair?

It loosened something that sat painful and heavy in Tim's chest. It felt like he could *breathe* for the first time in days.

He still had another four hours before LTR-49-1060 departed from the Greenspire Depot, with a respectable cargo consisting of various farm equipment, twelve tons of chickenfeed, and Timothy Jackson Drake.

It was the easiest thing in the world to raise his camera and snap a

photo of a stray cat perched imperiously on the head of a statue.

Easier still, to swing himself up on to a fire escape, with the excuse of having a better sense of direction from a bird's eye view.

Whatever else the city had done to him, Atlanta had a beautiful skyline, and old habits die hard. Tim spent the hours scaling buildings, vaulting rooftops, and finally *seeing* the city. Collecting little snapshots of what made this place special. After an hour, he was flushed with exertion instead of cold, and barely even noticed his missing coat. He even stopped a purse-snatcher or two. It was the most fun he'd had since he'd gotten here.

So fun, in fact, that he lost track of time.

Tim *flew* down the grassy hillside, swearing up a blue streak that would make Kon blush. He hurled himself bodily into the side of a moving train, plastering himself to the aluminum siding using only his fingertips, years of training, and spite. Hooking a hand over the heavy metal door, he tugged with all his strength, creating a gap just large enough to swing himself inside.

Tim rolled to absorb the impact and came to a stop lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. He let himself rest there, panting, before a sharp bubble of laughter burst out of him, an aftershock of stress and adrenaline and the knowledge of how *ridiculous* this whole situation was.

He was *train-hopping* back to Gotham. And not even as Robin! Maybe he should have picked up a little stick and a bandana, to complete the look. Tim smothered his amusement and checked over his stuff, making sure nothing had gotten broken when he'd pancaked into the side of a train like Wile E. Coyote—and Tim lost it again.

It would be about two hours to his next connection. The train car didn't have windows, and Tim, of course, didn't have his phone; so, he propped the door halfway open and amused himself by trying to snap pictures of the scenery as it flew by.

He didn't have a lot of luck, but got a few okay shots of distant buildings and mountains.

The wind whistled through the car, but Tim had nestled himself between two enormous piles of sacked chicken feed to protect against the chill. As the city faded, miles of field and forest stretched out before him.

His hands shook around the camera, and his pictures grew blurrier and less frequent, until at last he found himself staring into the night soaring past him, motionless save for his own harsh trembling.

Tim wasn't stupid; he knew this was big. This wasn't the sort of thing people could just *do* and get away with, even rich people. Even if it was just Tim, who hadn't felt like anyone's kid in years.

He put the camera down. His hands wouldn't stop shaking.

Climbing to his feet, he stumbled coltishly toward the open door and curled his hands around the frame, letting the harsh wind slap against his face and yank at his clothes. Letting his toes peek out over the edge.

"My dad's a bad person," Tim whispered into the night, and then, even softer, "I don't deserve this."

He tensed instinctively, but nothing happened. The train rattled around him, the night remained empty and enormous, and the words hung in the air, unchallenged, before being snatched away by the wind.

He said it again, louder.

He *screamed* it into the night, and it was like something inside of him cracked savagely in half because suddenly Tim was crying and he couldn't *stop*.

He was *angry*, maybe the angriest he'd ever been. Angry at his mother, for forgetting him, for dying on him. Angry at Bruce and Dick, for not finding him out before it got this far, no matter how hard Tim had worked to keep his tumultuous relationship with his father a secret. For letting another Robin get eaten alive by their civilian identity.

When the rage eventually ran dry, the tears did not.

On the rare occasions that Tim cried, he preferred to do so quickly and discreetly. Handle it like a black eye; annoying and painful and a little embarrassing, but easy to forget about once it was over and done with. Better to lie and obfuscate than to say something and have no one care.

But now? Great, heaving sobs dragged themselves from his chest, audible over even the roar of the train, and he couldn't stop it if he tried. And part of him was *glad*. He didn't want to be quiet, he didn't

want to fade. Even if his dad had forgotten him, or pretended to out of anger, Tim didn't just stop existing. And he didn't just exist in some nebulous somewhere, as a concept; he was here, right now, and he could feel the wind cutting his face and the rusty metal under his hands and he was *here*.

He didn't cease to exist when people stopped caring about him.

He was a person.

He hadn't deserved this. He'd never deserved any of it.

Tim didn't know how long he'd cried before finally uncurling his stiff, frozen fingers from the metal siding and collapsing back into his burlap alcove. He felt utterly exhausted, but also oddly...light. *Giddy*, even.

Did he even have to go back to Gotham? The thought came to him unbidden. A hoarse, disbelieving laugh bubbled out of his mouth.

No one knew where he was. Not his dad, not his team, not even Batman. What if he just *stayed* here? In this funny in-between place, this twilight with Timothy Jackson Drake on one horizon and Robin III on the other. Here, he wasn't either one of them; he wasn't crushed under the weight of two lives' worth of secrets and responsibilities.

Here, he could exist in his purest form: A boy holding a camera with no one looking out for him but himself. It felt good, to admit that, to trust it. It felt honest.

Tim laughed. Took a few more pictures. Chewed another stick of gum.

Rationally, Tim knew he couldn't sit in a boxcar filled with chickenfeed forever. But it was nice to pretend.

By the time he'd crossed the border into North Carolina, Tim had come back to his own head a little, and spent the remainder of the ride simmering with low-level embarrassment. Nevertheless, he couldn't bring himself to regret his lapse. It sounded backwards, but crying had made him feel better, and besides, nobody knew but him.

As it reached Charlotte, the train chugged more and more slowly, and Tim took the chance to slip out of his little box before it came to a complete stop. He checked his watch: 2:30am. Perfect. He had just

over two hours to get across town to the East Gotterby Station to catch the...Tim shuffled his notes, looking for the right printout...the 710-WFD-RCM on Southern Washington-Virginia line. He, alongside a staggeringly large shipment of house paint, would be departing at exactly 4:45am.

That would get him as far as Baltimore.

Tim hadn't eaten since his half-finished soup at the bistro, which might as well have been a lifetime ago. Distinctly lacking in funds, he consulted his map and decided to cut through an apple orchard on his way across town. Tim amassed a small collection of fruit in a sack he'd repurposed from some spare burlap commandeered from the chicken train. He snacked as he walked, whistling between bites.

The apples were a little ripe, but delicious and fresh and sun-warmed in a way that seemed to transfer directly from the crisp flesh right to the center of his chest. Even at night, the orchard was beautiful. There was a half-moon nesting overhead, illuminating a cloudless, glittering sky. Tim wandered around, taking in the view, and even snapped a few pictures before he caught himself and checked the time. He was *not* going to do this again.

Sheepishly, he cut his foraging short and continued on his way, aiming to catch his ride *before* it left without him this time. The small sack of apples bounced warmly against his hip, and he promised to send an anonymous donation to cover what he'd stolen.

The novel approach of getting somewhere on time required sneaking past security, but that didn't pose any real challenge. He was Robin, not a drunk teenager or a century-confused highwayman.

Tim quickly situated himself in an unlocked car and settled in for the ride. It wasn't as charming or as cozy as the chicken train, but it was fairly clean, and there were some bulk shipments of tarp off to one side that offered a comfortable place to lean. Tucking himself amid the stiff pillars of fabric, he was pleased to find a good spot, hidden from the entrance, with a soft place to curl up and space enough for his little collection of belongings. This would be the longest stretch of his journey, clocking in at six hours, and it was likely to be his only chance to get some rest before he reached Bludhaven.

Setting a little alarm on his watch, Tim nestled into his nook and allowed his aching eyes to drift shut. The *ka-thunk ka-thunk* signalled the beginning of their departure, and he let the steady rhythm of the

locomotive rock him into comfortable lethargy.

The scream of ripping metal jolted Tim from a dead sleep.

He opened his eyes just in time to see a pair of grappling bodies crash into the middle of the floor. Heart pounding, still half-asleep, Tim struggled to get his bearings, freezing in place as the battle swung perilously close to his hiding spot.

The sight of that familiar red helmet gleaming in the moonlight snapped him into wakefulness like a blast of ice-water to the face. It was a particularly unfriendly shade of red, one that Tim hadn't seen in almost six months. Not since the owner had infiltrated one of the most secure bases on the planet and beaten Tim half to death with his own gear.

Jason Todd.

All at once, sensation flooded him, lighting him up to the tips of his fingers and toes. It was like Tim had been slammed back into his own body from a great height; as if he'd been disconnected, somehow, ever since he stepped out of that library in Atlanta. In an instant, every messy thing that was Tim Drake snapped closed along the lines that formed the sharp, uniform angles of Robin.

It wasn't that Red Hood *didn't* scare him; this was just a familiar fear, one that made his feet quick and his mind sharp. Tim had won and lost a thousand fights against creeps in stupid hats in the past four years.

He knew how to play this game.

First things first, Robin. Get the lay of the land.

Jason's opponent was dressed in dark clothing and moved with the distinct, casual deadliness of your typical league-affiliated merc-for-hire. A jagged section of the roof had been *peeled* back, from the state of it, meaning either one or both of them was sporting some kind of enhancement.

They exchanged blows almost too fast for Tim's eyes to follow. A casual observer might call them evenly matched, but he recognized the flashy chatter and misdirection that was all Robin intermixed with a brutal efficiency that he'd felt firsthand.

For whatever reason, Hood was toying with the guy. Dodging blows that clawed holes in the metal siding (*bingo, super-strength*) a hair slower than he could have, leaving openings that became broken fingers when taken, dancing out of the way with a delicate spin or flip before planting a steel-plated boot almost through the guy's ribcage. The dance was mesmerising.

It didn't help that Weird Guy didn't seem to have a good grasp on his newfound strength, punches flying wide and balance thrown off by more than just Hood's flashy footwork. A real greenhorn, then. He couldn't have had his powers more than a few days, and was both more and less dangerous as a result.

Reconnaissance complete. Tim had two options: stay and hide, or make a break for it.

The door of the boxcar rattled invitingly where he'd left it unlatched, winking at a rocky hillside. Tim grimaced. He'd probably survive the fall, but his camera almost certainly would not. His papers would be useless. He'd have to find another library to plot a new way home, and his current itinerary (he rifled through his papers, glanced at his watch) put him somewhere depressingly Appalachian.

Paint cans began to explode around the car as gunfire started up, and Tim heaved a regretful sigh. He really, really liked this camera. Pulling a quick, silent somersault over to the door, he peered out at the sheer drop and rolled his shoulders back in preparation. After a moment of hesitation, he wrenched the door open.

Behind him, the gunfire cut off sharply. Tim glanced back nervously, but he hadn't been spotted; Weird Guy had gotten in a lucky hit, and when super strength was involved, one hit was usually all it took. Hood was pinned to the ground by the back of his neck, with a knee digging into his kidneys. His captor leaned down, hissing something into Jason's ear that made his whole body go rigid.

The thing about Robin's combat style was that it was designed with the expectation that (and had proven most effective when) you weren't fighting alone. Someone to catch you when you took a leap of faith, someone to cover you when you drew fire.

This wasn't Tim's problem. Bruce and Dick could lament about *the boy he used to be* all day long, but that didn't make Jason *his* long-lost greatest regret. As far as he was concerned, Jason was just some guy who sucked; end of story. It wasn't like he'd drop everything to help

Tim if he was in trouble.

Weird Guy had moved on, had hooked his fingers under the edge of the helmet and was trying to yank it off without unlatching it first. Jason's neck was wrenched sideways with every tug. With the way things were going, he'd rip his head off along with the stupid helmet.

Tim didn't have so much as a batarang on him. What was he supposed to do against a guy Red Hood couldn't handle?

He glanced longingly at the cliffside one last time before swearing and retreating back to a more defensible position, keeping eyes on Jason and Weird Guy.

Slipping small and unobtrusive between gaps of standing tarps, Tim waited until a particularly savage *ka-thunk* shook the boxcar before, with an almighty shove, sending a third of the heavy material toppling onto the two men. The noise was tremendous, starting a chain reaction that sent paint cans clattering from the shelves en masse.

Weird Guy took the brunt of the heavy fabric to the head and spine with a startled squawk, and Jason took advantage of his momentary distraction to brace and *flip* him straight through the open door and down the side of the mountain. His fading yells, either too garbled or too not-English for Tim to understand, ended before impact could occur.

Tim shivered. Maybe it was better he hadn't gone for it.

Jason slammed the door shut with a rattling scrape and braced himself against the metal, panting. Tim scuttled back into his little alcove and hugged his apple sack to his chest.

There. Situation handled. Threat neutralized. Now all he had to do was wait for Red Hood to scam, and he was golden. Still on track to Baltimore, even. So, Tim waited. But there was no scrape of steel, no click of weapons being sheathed. The seconds ticked by with no change, until a sharp bang echoed through the car. Tim peered around a corner of the tarp concealing him, curiosity winning out over caution.

Jason had stumbled away from the door and fallen to his knees. His breathing was thick and audible as he wrestled to get his now misshapen helmet off. Tim watched with a kind of morbid fascination as Hood basically clawed at the thing until it released, and held his breath when he hurled it into the opposite wall with a deafening bang.

Hood immediately curled in on himself, burying his fingers in his own hair, taking gulping breaths, rubbing his neck, rocking back and forth gently; obviously trying to self-soothe. Tim looked away, uncomfortable intruding on such a private moment.

So what if Hood was wiggling out a little after a bad fight. It happened to all of them at some point or another. The plan didn't need to change. Jason was going to clear out sooner or later, he reasoned. All Tim had to do was keep quiet and wait him out.

The relative silence of the train car was cut by the sharp, shrill beep of Tim's watch.

In the space of a breath, the tarp concealing him was ripped aside and Jason Todd was looming over him, eyes red, breathing ragged. Tim knew the exact moment Jason recognized him, because his eyes picked up a familiar, hateful sheen, glowing steadily in the shadows.

"Replacement," Jason snarled, "What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

Chapter End Notes

Jason enters stage train roof.

Thank you so much for all the wonderful comments! Seeing people so excited for this story made me excited for it, too. This is unbeta'd, so if there's any grand inconsistencies or spelling errors please do not be shy
Thanks for reading!

Baltimore

Chapter Summary

Wherein Tim feels his age, loses his watch, and does not solve a single mystery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“What the *fuck* are you doing here, Replacement?” Jason scrubbed his sleeve roughly over his eyes, as though doing it quickly enough would stop Tim from noticing.

“Would you believe me if I said I was on vacation?” Tim tried, earning himself a very clear view down the barrel of a .45 and not much else.

"Pull the other one," Jason intoned dispassionately, voice only slightly hoarse. "You're here on the Bat's orders, aren't you? Spying on me." Jason's eyes hadn't yet begun to spark a familiar lurid green, but his teeth were bared in a furious snarl, and that was nostalgic enough to send dread crawling up Tim's throat like a swarm of wasps.

“Jason, come on.” Careful to not let his panic show, Tim did the only thing he could think of and hopped to his feet, putting himself in the light and letting his arms hang at his sides non-threateningly. "Do I *look* like I'm here to spy on you?" He knew what he looked like. Nothing that could be construed as gear save for his camera, which was too clunky and conspicuous to be gutted and repurposed for espionage. A burlap sack half-filled with apples. Jeans and T-shirt. Worn out sneakers. Jason was a detective; if he could get over himself long enough to actually detect, he'd know Tim wasn't here on any sort of official nightly business.

Jason did look. And kept looking, far more intently than it took to confirm his story. Tim watched nervously as Jason's eyes catalogued what felt like every inch of him: his skin, filthy and sweaty from rough travel. Hair greasy and tangled, clothing flecked with chickenfeed and foliage. His eyes lingered on the tear tracks streaked through the grime on his face, the juice stains growing sticky on his fingers and around his mouth. Tim resisted the urge to squirm in place. Jason was a detective; he'd draw some *meaning* from the gesture, armed with the same sharpness he was picking Tim apart with right now.

Jason blinked a few times as he catalogued the baffling reality of Tim's situation, fight giving way to something lighter. Tim watched him warily as he lowered the gun, raising his left hand to his face to...conceal a smirk. What an asshole.

"Hey!" Tim snapped reflexively. Gun or no gun, he wouldn't take this lying down. It was the principle of the thing.

"Thing is, there's literally no reason for you to be here except to spy on me." Jason grinned, caught out and unrepentant. "But if you're a spy, this is the worst fucking cover I've ever seen. Who are you supposed to be, Johnny Appleseed?"

"Oh, fuck you," Tim bit out, tired and annoyed, "maybe *you're* Johnny Appleseed."

Jason grinned, seemingly delighted that Tim had chosen to play along. "Okay, so you're Benny Alden, fine by me." Tim had no idea who that was. Did Johnny Appleseed have an archnemesis? Nonetheless, he arranged his face into something he hoped read as disapproval. His effort was wasted on Jason, who'd holstered his gun and was now rifling through his pockets, presumably for quips. "Vacation. *Sure*. You're on a cross country trek to find yourself somewhere in the great American mid-east," Jason nudged the burlap sack with his foot, visibly amused. "You'd better cut the Newbery Medal bullshit before you learn some unforgettable lesson about the fleeting nature of childhood."

"I don't have any berries, I've got apples," Tim corrected, "and I don't need to take this from a walking, talking lecture on childhood mortality." Jason's responding laugh was bright and pleased, if mocking; Tim let out the breath he'd been holding. This was fine. If Jason wanted to banter, they could banter. For...he snuck a glance at his watch and winced. Two whole hours. Yeah, right.

A single moist towelette, flung through the air, struck Tim full in the face with a wet sound like...well, like a moist towelette hitting someone in the face. Not everything sounds like something else.

"Clean yourself up, Dorothy Ann," Jason called over, amused. "You look like—"

"Fuck *off*, Jason," Tim grumbled. He raised a hand to pluck at the rag covering his eyes. A light scuffing sound was his only warning before his wrist was grabbed and wrenched behind him and his world *tilted*. Before he could so much as yelp, Tim was on the ground, on his

stomach, arms zip tied behind him and a heavy boot pressing into the middle of his back.

Panic spiked through him and he tried to wriggle free, but Jason knew all his tricks and had about sixty pounds on him besides. Snagging the strap of Tim's camera bag, he dangled everything Tim owned in the world gleefully from a single finger and said, "Reunion's been a blast, kid, but let's see what brings our most *bumbling* of Boy Wonders up and down the coast." Tugging loose the papers Tim had stuffed inside, unwinding the rubberband securing them, letting the cheap pen from the library clatter to the metal flooring next to Tim's head. Could he use it to escape? Above him, Jason made a pleased sound. "Well, *hello*. What have we here, Replacement?" He flips through the pages with theatrical interest, looking for evidence of a drug shipment or gang activity that *wasn't fucking there*.

Tim felt for his watch, hoping to...except it was gone. He craned his head around enough to see a very familiar glint on Jason's wrist, and resisted the urge to slam his own head repeatedly into the floor. Jason was such an *asshole*. Tim should have let him get his stupid head ripped off.

The shuffling of papers and Jason's obnoxious *hmm hmm-ing* cut off abruptly. Tim was grabbed and roughly flipped over, landing painfully on his bound arms. A heavy boot came down in the center of his chest, forcing the air from his lungs, and he watched through watering eyes as Jason tossed the papers aside and went for the camera instead.

To be honest, seeing the Red Hood's hands on that camera was almost worse than having the gun to his head. It was stupid, it was sentimental, but...He'd decided against hitchhiking specifically because he couldn't pull off young adult, mugged and down on his luck, while toting around a \$700 camera. He'd been through so much with that camera by his side, and hadn't been able to bring himself to part with it. To lose it here, after everything? Maybe it would have been smarter to keep quiet, not let on that Hood might have some sort of leverage over him, but he couldn't keep the terror out of his voice when he rasped, "Please be careful; that camera's old, it's..." before he had the sense to shut his mouth.

Jason, in a rare show of mercy, acted as though he hadn't heard him. He fiddled with his camera for a few more moments before looping the strap around his neck and turning his full attention on Tim. "Okay, Replacement. I've decided I'm in a listening mood after all. Tell me about this *vacation* of yours."

The grim tone sent a jolt of alarm down Tim's spine. "Maybe I am here to spy on you, actually," he said without thinking. Jason's expression was flat and unimpressed, and the pressure on Tim's chest increased until a ragged wheeze was forced from his mouth.

Why shouldn't he just tell Jason the truth? How was it any different, really, from telling an empty train car? Jason didn't give a shit about him. It shouldn't make a difference.

Except. Tim had been so sure that what had happened with his dad in Atlanta *mattered*, on the last train. Certain of it. But now? What was a long walk home compared to what Jason had been through? What if Jason thought it was funny, or that he deserved it? What if he made some *glib* comment about how few people actually want Tim around in the first place? "I'm a spy," Tim reiterated.

"Consider the mission compromised, Encyclopedia Brown," Jason retorted without humor. A sheet of paper was shoved under his nose, and as he struggled to catch his breath, his own itinerary swam into focus. On one side, the week he'd planned with his dad, neatly typed. On the other, Tim's way home to Gotham, scrawled in pen. "What the fuck is this?"

The number LTR-49-1060, leaving at 10:30pm DST on the R-Line, dest. Charlotte, NC. 4 hours.

Two hours to get across town.

Take the 710-WFD-RCM on the Southern Washington-Virginia line from South Gotterby Station at 4:45am TWT (Tim's Watch Timezone) to Baltimore. Six hours.

Rustle up three-dollars-plus-tax to board an actual passenger train to Trenton. One hour.

Catch the New York Through Atlantic line dest Jersey City at 2:00pm TWT, which would pass through Bludhaven about 45 minutes into the trip. Jump off a moving train.

Get to Dick's apartment.

Busted. Jason peered down at him, eyebrows raised. "Ignoring literally everything else, how does an expedition funded by Bruce Wayne have a budget of less than three dollars?"

"I've...gone rogue?" Tim tried. It might have been more convincing if

it hadn't come out as a question.

"Bullshit. You're in some kind of trouble. And I'd wager," it wasn't possible for Jason to be able to feel Tim's fluttering heartbeat through the sole of his boot. It wasn't. "that the Big Bad *Bat* has no idea."

Tim swallowed.

"So what's the deal? You get framed for murder or something?" Jason asked, then smirked, "Or commit murder?"

Tim glared, "Of course not. I'm not *you*."

"Cut the crap. Are you running from somebody?" Tim kept his mouth firmly shut. Jason sighed. "Look. The guy in the pictures, that's your dad, right? Did he get nabbed? Are you out here looking for him?"

Sharp, ugly fury bubbled in Tim's chest. "Oh, don't worry about my dad," he snarled venomously. "Wherever he is, I'm sure he's just *fine*."

Jason had been twitchy since the conversation had started. Shuffling papers, tapping his fingers on his chest, glancing around the car. Tim hadn't realized just how *much* he'd been moving until all of it stopped, every inch of Jason's focus now honed in on Tim and his big, stupid mouth.

Jason gave him a long look, still as a photograph, before he slowly, carefully said, "It sounds like he might not deserve to be."

And how was Tim supposed to respond to something like that?

"Why are you out here, kid?" The quiet concern on Jason's face made Tim's chest ache, and in that moment, he wasn't looking at Red Hood anymore. "What did he do?"

In a scene plucked from a lifetime ago, Robin had gazed down at a filthy, shivering Tim Drake and had gently asked him what he was doing so far from home. If his parents knew where he was. If they cared. It was uncanny; he even had his camera with him.

It wasn't all the same, of course. The boot on his chest was new. The roar of the locomotive. The gray streaks in Jason's hair. The heavy lines around his own eyes.

Another difference? Tim took a deep breath. Told himself, *It's bad enough. It's bad enough for someone to do something about it.*

This time, he told the truth.

To his credit, Jason didn't interrupt; he just watched, hawk-like, as Tim rambled through explanations that grew steadily more frantic. The novelty of presenting *his* side made him trip over his words more than usual. But Jason didn't say anything, just nodded, hummed, and *listened*.

"—And once I reach Bludhaven, Dick's gonna drive me the rest of the way home. I think. If he agrees to. To do that. Um. But I think he will." Tim trailed off, heart pounding.

And he waited, tense as a bowstring, for the inevitable questions.

Are you telling the truth?

Are you sure that's what happened, Timothy?

Instead, powerful arms were hauling him to his feet, and there was an iron grip on his jaw, forcing him still.

Instinctively, Tim tried to jerk away, but he'd barely gotten out a single, stuttered apology before it registered that he wasn't about to get popped in the mouth.

Rather, Jason (armed with another damn towelette) was scrubbing roughly at the grime and tears and juice on his face, swearing under his breath. "This is what I'm talking about. This is exactly what I'm always talking about, but nobody ever fucking listens to me, and now *look* at you!"

Furiously, Jason sliced through the zipties and got to work scrubbing Tim's fingers clean. Tim was at a complete loss for words, but luckily Jason seemed to have enough to say for the both of them.

Strong fingers plucked leaves from his hair and crud from his clothes. It was surreal. "No one in their right mind should trust that man to look after children, I swear. Goddamn billionaire."

That, finally, helped Tim find his voice. "Wait. Are you mad at *Bruce*?" It didn't mean anything, he told himself; Jason was mad at Bruce like it was his job. "I didn't tell him. There's no way he could have—"

"He should have known." Jason leveled a steely glare at him. "He should have done something before it got this bad. God, your fingers are like popsicles. Where's your fucking coat?"

Distantly, Tim noticed that his teeth were chattering. "It was in the car when my dad—"

"Fuck," Jason swore, and suddenly a heavy, sturdy warmth was swung over his shoulders, and he was enveloped in Jason's brown leather jacket. The shock of warmth was dizzying, and Tim almost missed what Jason said next.

"—and I'm coming with you."

"What!?" Tim squawked. "You can't be serious."

"As a heart attack. What was the plan, roll up to old Dickie's doorstep looking like a scarecrow that got left out in the rain, and *hope* he just accepts whatever bullshit excuse you cook up? Face it, your plan was doomed to fail anyway."

If I look pathetic enough, Dick might do something about it without me having to beg for help. "I was going to shower before he got home from work," Tim lied.

"Nah. I'll deliver you personally. Set the record straight. It'll be my good deed for the day." Jason nudged Tim into a seated position and plopped right down next to him. "Besides, I've got something I know you want."

"...My camera?" Tim guessed.

"Nope!" Jason grinned. It was a warm expression, almost as warm as the jacket. There was a bright steadiness that came with it, a promise that maybe Tim not only wouldn't have to, but would not be *allowed* to deal with this by himself.

Tim smiled tentatively back, and if his voice wavered, no one was going to tell. "What, then?"

Jason winked. "Three dollars."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter is a little late!

Jason's references:

-Johnny Appleseed is an American historical-figure-turned-folktale who wandered the early US on foot and planted over a million apple trees in his lifetime.

-A Newbery Medal is awarded to outstanding children's literature, and often favors books that deal with profound childhood tragedy and the loss of innocence.

-Benny Alden is youngest of The Boxcar Children, a children's book series about child detectives. They are orphans, and spent their first adventure living by themselves in an abandoned boxcar, hence the name and why Jason brings it up.

-Dorothy Ann is the resident bookworm from the Magic School Bus series.

-Encyclopedia Brown is a boy detective.

I like the idea that Jason has no idea how old Tim is, and is skewing younger and younger in his references (bc Robins are born to quip) but Tim gets absolutely none of it bc he straight up doesn't read for fun and never has (at least not fiction).

Please let me know what you think, and thank you for sticking with me!

Bludhaven

Chapter Summary

In which Tim goes to breakfast, takes a nap, and receives some unexpected news.

Chapter Notes

please enjoy.

I really hope you like it.

heads up for some internalized homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jason, it turned out, had quite a bit more than three dollars, which is how Tim found himself sitting across from a murderer in a greasy diner in Baltimore, nudging toast crusts around his plate with a spoon.

He was still draped in Jason's enormous jacket with his camera safe around his neck, bumping reassuringly against his chest when he shifted. On the ground, the sack of apples was a steady weight against the side of his foot. It felt a little foolish to bring it along, but Jason, spotting some undefined *something* in Tim's expression, had gotten a steely look in his eye and refused to leave it behind. So here it was.

This was weird. Definitely one of the weirder meals of Tim's life, and he'd had a pretty weird life. Still, there was no denying he was starving, and a king's feast of toast and oatmeal was as good as anything else.

Jason, apparently far more trusting of meat served in strange places, pointed at him with an accusing forkful of eggs. "So. We're not doing any of your adventuring bullshit." His tone brokered no argument, and Tim quelled the urge to defend his perfectly reasonable plan around a mouthful of oatmeal. "No jumping off trains, no stealing away in the night. I'm going to buy us a couple of tickets, on a *nice* train, to Bludhaven."

Tim gave Jason a pointed once-over and raised a single, skeptical brow. "Do you really think they're gonna let us on a nice train?"

"Buck up, kid, you're not that ugly." Jason grinned, as if they hadn't been receiving uneasy glances from the servers and customers alike because a certain *someone* was wearing blood-stained body armor and

visibly packing heat.

Tim pointed at him with his spoon. "Jason, you look straight up evil."

"At most, I look mysterious. I'm not even wearing the helmet!" Jason spread his arms as though this had been a generous and placating gesture on his part, rather than Jason hurling it out of a moving train and blowing it up in midair because he thought it'd be funny.

"As if that does anything other than make you look like a less specific murderer. You look like you're stopping for breakfast on your way to commit a hate crime." Jason rolled his eyes. Tim frowned. "Seriously. The waitress stopped me on my way back from the bathroom and asked if I needed her to sneak me out through the kitchen."

Jason raised his eyebrows. "That's pretty ballsy. I'll leave her a good tip."

"You'd better."

They fell into a somewhat uncomfortable silence as they ate, the silverware clicking against plates underscoring uneasy, unmet glances.

Tim watched his watch glint on Jason's wrist from under his bangs, good enough at what he does to not get caught staring. This was so fucking surreal. He and Jason weren't exactly family, and definitely weren't friends. They could rib each other all day long, sure, but that's because they were both Robin. It was practically in the job description.

Tim was good at cold, emotionless logic. The best of any of them, save maybe Batman. Jason, meanwhile, had always been the worst; he was clever and calculated, skilled at finding clues and solving puzzles (you couldn't be Robin without it), but he never allowed for that *divide* between the choices he made and his compassion. Or his righteous anger, for that matter. It made him the best of all of them, at times, and the worst at others.

So, right now, Jason didn't care that he hated Tim. Didn't care that he might have to see Dick, might have to talk to him for the first time in months. This wasn't about Dick.

This wasn't really about Tim, either. This was about *Jason* helping *a child in need*, or whatever, and doing it on an absolute whim besides. And that was fine. Tim was used to the most important stuff in his life not being about him, and this wasn't going to matter more than, say,

becoming Robin or his mother's death. Or his entire childhood. This didn't need to be about Tim any more than was necessary to get him home.

Jason, having soldiered through the rest of his unfortunate looking eggs, heaved a sigh and stretched. "You know, I've been thinking. As obnoxious as you are wont to be, you may have had a point about the clothes thing."

Jason pushed back his chair and made to stand up. "Here's the plan: You hang tight here for a sec, and I'm gonna pop around the corner—" And Tim *lunged* across the table, locking both hands around Jason's wrist before he could even finish getting to his feet.

Tim had moved without thinking. His heart was pounding in his chest and he felt almost dizzy, permeated by a sick kind of fear. "Don't—" he managed to choke out.

Jason blinked down at him, mouth hanging open in surprise, before something...uncomfortable crawled across his expression and he said, "Never mind. You're coming with me. Of course you're coming with me." Tim dropped Jason's arm, embarrassment and relief pounding behind his ribcage. "I can wait until you're done."

"I'm done now." Tim said, dropping his napkin onto his plate and pushing his chair back.

"You sure?"

"Yeah," Tim said, not looking at him.

Together, they walked down the street, Jason with his hands in his pockets and Tim trailing just a hair too close.

If the silence at breakfast had been rough, this one bordered on downright painful.

Jason cleared his throat awkwardly. "Listen—"

"You don't need to say anything." Tim interjected.

Jason ignored him. "Listen, *please*."

The please surprised him so much that Tim actually stopped walking. Jason didn't look at him, but he stopped walking, too. "You're right in that I look suspicious. And alone, I'm an oddity. People will stare,

maybe, and the cashier won't look me in the eye. But if I'm carting around a filthy, half-starved, semi-recognizable teenager? I'm a threat, and not to mention a probable kidnapper. It's connected to a school, some local private college, and I just didn't want us to get caught on the security cameras together. That's the only reason I said what I said. I wasn't thinking. I wasn't going to leave you behind."

"I know that," Tim mumbled, embarrassed, "and you don't have to apologize. I over-reacted, that's all. It's not a big deal."

"I still don't want to get seen, if at all possible." Jason said, ignoring Tim and his little pity party. "Now, the shop has a glass front and as far as I can tell, only one entrance. There's a bench you can sit on where you should be able to see me the whole time. Would you be okay to wait outside? And if you need anything, even if it's dumb, you can come in and get me."

Tim flushed. "I'm fine, I don't need to—"

"If you need me, for any reason," Jason interrupted, "you'll come in and get me. Okay? Promise."

"Fine, fine." Tim said, more to get Jason to stop acting *weird* than because he had any intention of following through.

He'd never admit it, but being able to see Jason moving from aisle to aisle in the tiny store did ease his nerves a bit. And it was definitely a more entertaining show than Tim had been expecting. Clothes shopping in a place that apparently specialized in college textbooks (according to the sign on the door) did not make for an elegant selection.

When Jason emerged victorious, he was swamped in an enormous maroon sweatshirt that declared him a member of the 'Loyola wolf pack'. Tim *stared*. "What'dya think?" Jason did a spin, showing off an enormous cartoon wolf plastered across the back. He kicked out a leg to show off the equally overlarge sweatpants in a different, equally unflattering shade of maroon.

Tim's lips twitched despite himself. "You look like you're going to a pep rally where the school mascot is a deflated couch."

Jason huffed a laugh. "Gotta hide the guns somehow, kid." and smoothly tossed him a small bundle, which Tim caught instinctively.

It turned out to be two items wrapped in a rubber band: A cheap

toothbrush and a candy bar. He waved them at Jason unquestioningly. "Isn't this a little counterproductive?"

"Balance is important in all things," Jason admonished with a glint in his eye. "See, if you don't brush your teeth, you'll turn out like me; but if you never eat candy, you'll turn out like Batman."

His grin when Tim laughed was equal parts triumphant and relieved.

"Okay kid, the fashion show's over. I'm a respectable member of society again. Let's head to the station."

The woman in charge of letting them on the *nice train* did give them a baffled once-over, but didn't call the cops, which Tim counted as a victory.

Jason shelled out the big bucks, it seems, because this wasn't just a commuter, going-to-the-office train; this was a proper passenger train, a commercial train, with a polished wood interior and a snack cart and individual compartments to sit in with buttery soft leather seats. They ended up with a whole compartment to themselves; probably for the best, considering how bad Tim and Jason probably smelled.

Jason bought Tim a donut.

And something about having a full stomach, combined with the gentle motion of the train, plus stress, plus the both chronic *and* current lack of sleep had Tim...comfortable. Cozy, even.

So it was no surprise that he ended up falling asleep.

The first thing Tim noticed was warmth; he was warmer and more comfortable than he could remember feeling in a long while.

The second was the soothing motion of the world around him, a familiar *ka-thunk ka-chunk* that threatened to send him right back to sleep if he wasn't careful.

The third was that he—he wasn't alone. He was pressed to someone's side—an arm wrapped around him—who was—?

Jason.

Something was wrong. People didn't touch him. Not like this.

Heart pounding wildly, Tim shoved himself away, yelping, "I'm sorry,

I'm sorry—" as he scrambled backwards.

Jason let out a startled grunt of his own, emerging from a light doze to look at Tim like he was an alien. "Jesus Christ, kid, what's the matter with you? Everything's fine."

And that? That smarted. "It's not fine." Tim hissed, "Don't say it's fine."

He was ruining everything, like he always did. Making it something undeniably *Tim* instead of just some hurting kid. But it felt...sick, taking advantage of this sort of kindness. It felt like he was *tricking* Jason. "There's stuff you don't know. Information you don't have."

"What the actual fuck are you talking about?" In direct contrast with his tone, Jason had his hands up, like he was trying to calm a wild animal.

"My dad might have had a reason. For doing this. Stuff you don't know." What the hell was he saying? But he couldn't *lie*. Better to say something now and have Jason think he was a creep up front than having him find out later and be mad enough to *do* something about it.

Jason snorted. "Try again. There's no good reason to treat a kid like they're disposable."

"Well, you don't *know* the reason!" Tim all but shouted.

"You wanna fill me in, then?"

It should have been simple. *I'm not someone you want to be touching because*. Like starting a middle school essay.

Actually *saying* it felt like drowning. "I'm not..." Tim whispered hoarsely, "There's something wrong with me. You don't want to touch me." Jason raised an eyebrow. *Good. Now just tell him why*. "I. Um. I'm a...My dad knew. I didn't even know for sure until...there's this guy on my team who I—" Shit, that was *not* what he'd meant to say. Tim snapped his jaw shut, either to prevent more words from spilling out without his permission or to trap the air that was trying to escape his lungs in a panicked, shrill wheeze. This was a bad idea. What was he trying to do, *absolve* himself to Jason? Damage control, now: Change the subject. Pretend he didn't say anything.

But it was too late. When Tim forced himself to focus through a

blurriness that was *not* tears (not if he was his mother's son), he found Jason was looking at him with a careful, damning, *knowing* expression. "You came out to your dad, huh? And it went south?"

And that was such a ridiculous assumption that Tim forgot to hold his tongue. "No, I didn't *come out* to him. I'm not *stupid*." Tim snapped. "He went snooping through my stuff and found out for himself. I wasn't going to say anything. He's the one who went and made it his problem. He was furious. Said I was looking for attention, which is *rich*, considering I didn't even tell anyone—"

A stab of self-awareness cut right through the heart of his little tantrum. What was he doing? The semantics of *coming out* didn't matter here. That wasn't the *problem*.

"But that's not...What matters is that it's...it's *weird*. Liking girls and— and boys. It's unnatural, it's gross, it goes against everything he— everything I was raised to be. That's what he was actually mad about. Even if he never said it outright."

It was like a flood. Like once Tim had started, he didn't know how to stop.

"I think—I think he didn't want to entertain the *reality* of me doing— being *like that* long enough to acknowledge what the real issue was. Just called me—" Tim swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. He changed tracks. "And I denied it, of course I denied it. I said he was right—that I lied and made it up for attention. I even apologized, for all the good it did. But,"—his voice shook—"He was so angry. He told me he didn't know if he could love me anymore. He..."

Tim had never told anyone about this, not even Steph. Of course not; that would require telling her *why* Jack had been so angry, and the molten core of hot, dense shame in the pit of his belly held him back from even considering it. "He kicked me out, I guess. For a little while. It wasn't exactly a hardship; I just stayed in my room at the manor. Dad just needed space, I think? You know, to cool down. I wasn't even really punished for it, because after I came back he never mentioned it again except—" Tim bit his tongue.

"Except?"

"Sometimes he'll just make...comments. Around it. Usually when we're already arguing. Nothing he expects me to respond to, more like...letting me know he hasn't forgotten. Reminding me to be grateful he's willing to deal with me at all, I guess."

Tim didn't think he could say any more.

Jason got comfortable in his seat and gave Tim a firm nod. "Come here," he instructed.

"Huh?"

"Get over here. You heard me. I'm not having this conversation with you all the way over there."

And so Tim found himself settled under Jason's arm, tucked against his side, and utterly confused. Jason reached into the pocket of the leather jacket Tim was still wearing and pulled out a carton of cigarettes, flipping the lid up one-handed. Empty. He heaved a sigh, tossed the empty carton into the opposite seat, and wrapped the arm firmly, *intentionally*, around Tim's shoulders. With his other hand, he massaged his temples, as though warding off a headache.

"You're probably not supposed to smoke on trains anyway," Tim offered helpfully.

"Shut *up*," Jason said with an astounding degree of gentleness. He dropped his hand from his head to drum against the glass of the window. "I'm gonna assume you didn't tell Bruce about *this*, either."

Tim didn't answer. He didn't need to.

"Fuck. Christ. Okay, first of all: I'm sorry that happened to you. That kinda stuff is personal and the choice to tell someone you trust shouldn't have been taken away from you. The way your dad behaved says a lot more about him than it does about you.

"Second: It's not weird. It's completely natural. Perfectly fucking normal, okay? You have nothing to be ashamed of. Say it."

"Huh?"

"I want you to say it. Even if you don't believe it. Because I know you don't completely buy that garbage your dad was spewing, but you didn't hesitate to repeat that." Jason said. "Again: It's perfectly fucking normal, and you have nothing to be ashamed of."

Tim hesitated, but Jason didn't waiver. Clearing his throat nervously, he mumbled, "It's natural and, um, normal. And I shouldn't feel ashamed."

“Close enough. Next: You may feel alone, but you’re not. There’s lots of people who have felt what you’re feeling right now and who have experienced hardship as a result of their sexuality. People who came out the other side of the uncertainty and shame, and who are happy and thriving. Happier than they thought was possible for them when they were going through what you’re going through now.”

Tim’s only response was the tears soaking into the fabric of Jason’s goofy wolf shirt. Jason seemed to understand, though, continued without commenting.

“I’ve got some friends; I’ll reach out, see if I can’t give you their numbers, see if we can’t find someone for you to talk to. I think it’d be good for you.” Tim let out a sharp, jagged sob before he could stop himself. Warm, strong fingers began working through his filthy hair, gently working through the knots and scratching comfortably against his scalp. “You don’t have to say anything. You can cry, sleep, whatever. Take a break, kid. You’ve definitely earned one.”

And how, after that, was Tim supposed to keep pretending this wasn’t personal? That this wasn’t just someone seeing an objectively bad situation and wanting it to stop, but someone caring because it was happening to *Tim*?

He was tired, but... "Jason?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you came back." Tim confessed into the damp fabric of Jason’s sweatshirt, barely above a whisper.

Jason rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand, like he was bashful or something. "I told you I wasn't gonna ditch you in the store, kid. And you could see the door the whole time. Not that big of a deal."

"To life." Tim corrected quietly. "I know things haven't always been... *great* between you and me, but...I'm happy you came back to life. I'm glad you're here. I'm sorry about what happened to you; it wasn't fair and you didn't deserve it. I'm really, really happy you're alive."

Jason's body went so utterly rigid he might have turned to stone. Tim tensed, uncertain; was he angry?

It took him a second to identify the minute trembling for what it was.

No.

Dick and Bruce definitely preferred Jason alive and angry than dead and lost to them forever. But...had anyone actually *said* so to his face?

Based on the way Jason shuddered and choked out a terse, "Whatever," a full minute after Tim had finished speaking, it seemed they had not.

The arm around Tim's shoulders tightened, and Tim curled in closer, and they just...leaned on each other. It was nice.

"Sorry I took your watch," Jason muttered, voice wavering slightly.

Tim shrugged one shoulder where Jason could feel. "You should keep it. We'd all feel better if you had a way to get in contact if you need help. Or anything else."

"Really?" God, Jason was so young. Jason was so old.

"Yeah, Jason. Really."

In response, Jason wrapped his other arm around Tim and pulled him solidly against himself, all but smushing Tim's face against his chest, and rested a chin on top of his head.

And maybe Tim did let himself cry, just a little. But maybe it was okay, because he was pretty sure that Jason was crying too.

By the time they made it to Dick's apartment, it was undeniable that something had shifted. The air between the spot where their shoulders bumped as they ascended the stairs felt like something new, something tentative and tender. Warm. Jason's ears were bright red, but his shoulders were relaxed, and he hadn't asked for his jacket back yet.

They stood shoulder to shoulder at Dick's front door, and Tim felt a swell of anxiety so sudden and potent that it stole his breath for a moment. "Jason. Will you stay with me? Until this is over?" Tim didn't look over, hoping to avoid betraying how much his stomach was churning at the thought of facing this alone. "To make sure everything goes okay?"

"Don't know how good I am for making anything go *okay* in this family, "Tim went to interrupt, but Jason waved him away with a

small, genuine smile. "But yeah, Tim. If you want me to, I'll stay."

Tim gave a firm nod in response, squeezing his eyes shut for a brief moment. Finally, he dropped to a crouch in front of the door and stretched his hand out. "Okay. Give me your lock pick? I left mine at home."

There was a soft laugh behind him, and the small, warm pieces of metal were tucked into his palm.

Tim gets to work.

But he had barely even touched the metal to metal when the door was wrenched open in front of him.

Dick was staring at them both in alarm.

Something was wrong, his instincts screamed at him, *wrong, wrong, wrong*.

Dick looked exhausted, like he hadn't slept all night. His eyes drank in the sight of Tim with stark relief and something he couldn't decipher. Tim was unceremoniously yanked to his feet and pulled into a quick, firm embrace, and then all but dragged inside, his firm grip on Tim's shoulders transforming into something closer to a cage than a hug. "Bruce! He's here!" he shouted deeper into the apartment, voice noticeably hoarse.

What did he mean, *Bruce*? What in the world would Bruce be doing in Bludhaven? This was not the plan. This wasn't how this was supposed to go.

Jason's foot prevented the door from closing all the way, and he shouldered his way in, despite the *look* Dick was giving him over Tim's shoulder. Despite the venom in Dick's voice when he spat, "Why is he here, Tim? Did he kidnap you again?"

Jason let out an unfriendly snort and kicked the door shut behind him, leaning against the wall and pointedly lighting a cigarette. Indoors. It would have been more intimidating had he not been swimming in his enormous undercover clothes. But Tim couldn't even laugh. Jason was staying *because Tim asked*, despite the defensive hunch of his shoulders indicating how dearly he wished to be somewhere else.

Tim cleared his throat. "No. He, he helped me out of some trouble. He bought me breakfast. Brought me here. Dick, what are you doing

home?" Tim protested weakly, squirming in the tight grip. "You're supposed to be at work."

"At work? Tim, do you have any idea what's been going on?" Dick demanded incredulously.

At the sight of Batman walking out of Dick's study, Tim's hands began to shake. He felt Dick's hands finally release him. Even Jason froze with the cigarette halfway to his lips.

Because it was Batman coming down the short hallway, even if he wasn't wearing the cowl. This wasn't Bruce, who fostered him for the best and worst fifteen months of his life, who was still on file as Tim's primary emergency contact at school even now that Jack was healthy again.

No. The square of his shoulders, the hard line of his mouth was *all* Batman. This wasn't Tim's almost-father; this was Tim's boss. And he didn't look happy.

"Tim, you need to tell me exactly what's going on, right now."

This wasn't how this was supposed to go. This was all wrong.

"Are you currently in danger? Is there anyone chasing you, or threatening you, or is there a time-sensitive mission that needs to be completed?"

"No, sir."

Batman's shoulders relaxed slightly, but his expression didn't soften. "Tim, you went completely off the grid, hundreds of miles away from home. You didn't contact me. You lied to Dick. We had no idea where you were. Do you have any idea how worried we've been? You could have been *dead*, for all we knew." The disappointment smarted.

Tim's mouth was dry. Humiliatingly, he felt tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. "I...I didn't think..." his voice cracked, and he swallowed before continuing. "No one was supposed to notice."

"No one *notice*? Tim, do you have any idea how serious this is? You are two hours from becoming an official missing persons case. I just spoke with your father. He's beside himself: calling the authorities, contacting regional news stations. No one has any idea where you are!"

Tim stumbled back a step. "You talked to Dad?" he whispered. "He's...is he here?"

"Son," Bruce looked at him, shaking his head because he *hates Tim, hates him*, "Jack's in Atlanta. He's there looking for you."

Tim's heart stopped. He must have heard wrong. He stared at Bruce uncomprehendingly. Bruce was still talking, but Tim couldn't hear him very well over the pounding in his ears.

"Talk to me, please. If there wasn't a mission, what on *earth* possessed you to come all this way? Do understand that drawing this kind of attention to ourselves could potentially put our identities at risk? How would we explain your presence here?"

Tim was shaking. Tim couldn't breathe. Jack was in *Atlanta*? How? Why? What—

Bruce sighed. "It's going to be okay. We can get you back in about five hours, if we're careful. Not soon enough to avoid an investigation, but enough to close it quickly."

Tim's heart started back up then, pounding so powerfully he could feel it in his throat, choking him. *This can't be happening.*

Tim was good at logic, and his brain was far better suited to processing facts than emotions anyway. Fact: Tim could not, under any circumstances, go back to Atlanta.

So Tim didn't cry. He absolutely didn't look at Jason. (*He'll think I was lying, he'll think I made it up, that I'm doing this for attention—No. Not now.*)

Tim dove for the door. Dick intercepted him bodily, as fast and powerful as ever, forcing Tim to change tracks. He snatched Dick's phone from his shirt pocket and slipped himself into the hall closet, locking the door behind him and sinking to the floor in a heap. *Buy time. Buy time. Do not go back to Atlanta.* His breath was harsh in the confined space, loud and distracting.

Dick pounded on the door. "Tim! Tim, open up! You're not in trouble!"

Tim ignored him. With fumbling fingers, he logged into his email and opened the message from Marcia, reading it through once, twice, three times, looking for some clue he might have missed. Tears dripped down his chin. It looked normal, it communicated the same

information as before. What was Tim missing?

Numbly, he navigates from his own account and instead logs into his father's with a password he's not supposed to know. Another email, thanking his father for booking a reservation, an apology for the strict refund policy, and a confirmation to the update on his contact information.

Distantly, the sound of people shouting reached his ears, but his brain was too fuzzy to comprehend what was being said.

The facts were all there, but Tim couldn't seem to hold them in place long enough to make sense of things. His mind was skipping and stuttering along them like an old record, like if his brain didn't accept this it would stop being true.

All along, it had been— This had all just been some—

There's a loud click, and the closet door swung open. Bruce, Jason, and Dick were all staring down at him where he was crouched on the floor with his knees drawn up to his chest.

Dick had a small brass key in his hand and his mouth was twisted downwards. Jason's face was red and his chest was heaving. Bruce might as well have been made of stone.

Tim scooted back until he hit the back of the closet, clutching the phone to his chest. There was no way he was going to be able to get past them.

This wasn't how this was supposed to go.

Chapter End Notes

Railroading (n):

1. the action of traveling or working on the railroads.
2. the act of pressuring (someone) into doing something through coercion or by imposing unreal constraints. [informal]

This is a story about gaslighting.

Gotham

Chapter Summary

In which Tim loses the battle, wins the war, and finds his family.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for going on this journey with me. Here's to making it home safely.

(This chapter is insanely long. I know. I'm sorry.)

Content Warning: Gaslighting

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The thing was.

Tim had honestly thought this had been it. His dad had finally done something so awful that there wouldn't be a way to lie about it or cover it up.

He'd imagined it to himself; when he was snuggled up between sacks of corn, and eating breakfast with Jason, and climbing the steps up to Dick's apartment, he'd privately imagined, and quietly *reveled* in imagining, how Bruce and Dick would react to what his father had done to him.

Tearful insistence that he should have called them for help.
Reassurance that Tim hadn't deserved it, had never deserved any of it.
Demands that he stay at the Manor full-time. Maybe they'd cry. Maybe they'd hold him.

But now?

It had been a lie. A trick by Jack to humiliate Tim. This whole time, it had been a punishment. And Tim had gone all in because he had been too stupid to figure it out.

"Of course I wouldn't do that, Tim. I'm your father." He could hear Jack now, tone aghast but eyes like needles. He'd cluck his tongue, shake his head. Say, "But you've always been so eager to cast me as the bad guy. Always so desperate to play victim."

No, no no no NO NO NO—

The sound that came out of Tim's mouth didn't sound human. Someone was talking, but Tim couldn't make it out over the roar in his ears.

God, he was an idiot, he was such a fucking *idiot*. And Batman, standing in front of him, asking why he'd *run off* —It made him want to scream.

(Why are you always acting out, Tim?

Why do you lie all the time? Do you just want attention?

Why are you pretending to be hurt? No one saw anything happen.

Nothing's wrong, so why are you so upset?)

A sharp, familiar voice cut through the doom consuming him. "Tim! Please look at me. Please say something."

Firm hands gripped him by his shoulders, the only stable thing in a freewheeling universe, and Tim opened his eyes to find Bruce kneeling in front of him. And even through blurred vision, it felt like Bruce, this time. Not Batman. Batman wouldn't make a face like that.

The knowledge eased the vice on his chest enough for Tim to draw in half a breath. "No Atlanta. I won't go back," he choked out. "Don't make me—" The rest of his cunning argument was lost to a coughing fit.

The fingers locked around his upper arms spasmed and a water bottle was pushed into his hand by—someone. Tim took it with trembling hands, but didn't dare look away from the man before him. This was too important.

Except—

"Okay," Bruce said immediately. "No Atlanta." Just like that. A fresh wave of tears spilled down Tim's cheeks, and he blinked through them, fighting to keep a grasp on the situation. The tone and the hands were Bruce, but that unnatural stillness was all Batman. It was making it hard to keep track of who he was talking to. "What else?"

Tim was being managed, the logical part of his brain understood. Bruce was putting power back in Tim's court in order to make him feel

more grounded. Giving him the illusion of control.

"I keep Robin," Time insisted anyway, because even if this was just him being *handled* he wasn't risking it.

"Of course, Tim. That was never in question." The hands around his shoulders squeezed tightly. "I'm not angry with you," —*lie*— "and I believe that you wouldn't have taken off without telling anyone if you didn't have a good reason. But," and Tim squirmed underneath the weight of that penetrating gaze, "I don't know how to protect you unless you tell me what you're running from. And I *will* do everything I can to protect you; but first, Tim, I need you to help me understand."

Those familiar words hung in the air, as *well-meaning* as they always were, just looking for a logical, rational explanation to make the mess go away. But there never was one, and it came down to Tim's word against Jack's. And Tim had learned a long time ago that nobody, anywhere, *ever* believed a kid over a parent.

He *knew* better than to try, but they were all staring at him, and—
—and it wasn't *true*.

He croaked a meager, "That's not...my dad *left*, he..." before trailing off miserably, explanation sticking in his throat. Because that was provably false, wasn't it? Jack was in Atlanta, and Tim was here. What could he say? That Jack had switched rooms and changed the on-file email *just* to trick Tim into thinking he'd left? It sounded insane.

Bruce would never believe him. He could barely believe it himself.

The phone clutched against his chest told a completely innocent story. From the outside, sticking as close to the truth as possible, it looked as though Tim had misunderstood the situation and completely overreacted. If you didn't know about what his dad was like—and Jack was *careful* to make sure no one knew what he was like—Tim probably seemed crazy. Rage and embarrassment and helplessness surged under his skin, *furious* with Jack—But what had his father really even done? He hadn't even *told* Tim he was leaving; Tim had investigated for himself and come to the wrong conclusion.

His dad had tricked him, and Tim had fallen for it, because Tim was an idiot.

Bruce and Dick would be even angrier at him for reacting like this once they found out, for tricking them into thinking something was

actually wrong when it was just Tim being a baby, pitching a fit over nothing, making a *scene*—

Distantly, he registered that someone was hauling him up by his shoulders. “Tim! Son, I need you to *breathe*—” Bruce’s face swam into view, closer now. Close enough to see the piercing worry in his expression. His eyes *burned* into Tim. The hands on him tightened almost painfully, and Bruce’s tone picked up a note of desperation as he said, “Look at me. Deep breaths. You say Jack left? Where did he go? Why didn’t you call me? Why did you run?”

Tim stared up at him helplessly. He didn’t want to say it. He didn’t want to say anything. Not the truth Bruce wouldn’t believe, and not some lie that would exonerate his father from any and all responsibility.

They all stared down at him, waiting. Bruce, so close it was a little hard to breathe; Dick, his face tight with anger and concern and exhaustion. He still couldn’t bring himself to look at Jason.

“I didn’t run away.” When they finally came out, the words stuck like cotton in his throat, emerging as a dry whisper.

“You didn’t run away,” Bruce echoed, carefully neutral. “Okay. I believe you. Can you tell me what *did* happen?” Tim was pinned in place by that determined, endlessly patient stare. If it was a waiting game, Bruce would win. They both knew it.

“You won’t believe me,” Tim whispered.

What had Jack done? Skipped out on a meal. Moved his car. Switched rooms. Beyond that, Tim couldn’t prove anything. He knew better than to try.

He wasn’t going to *get away* from his dad. No one was going to get him out of this. He’d go back to his father’s house to face whatever was waiting for him there, and no one would care, not even if his dad hurt him. Not after this. He’d crossed the country unsupervised on a whim, like a reckless, idiot teenager; to the rest of the world, he’d just be getting what was coming to him.

Tim stared into Bruce’s face as hard as he could, trying to memorize it. Trying to soak in as much of the love and concern projected there as he could before anyone realized he didn’t deserve it.

His breath was starting to rattle in his chest again. His fingertips were

buzzing and he tried to wiggle them, to get the feeling back, but it didn't help.

Why was the room so hazy? Was there something wrong with his vision?

He couldn't breathe.

He couldn't breathe.

An elbow to his ribs made Tim lurch in alarm, shocking him into gasping down a lungful of air. And another after that.

Jason forced his way between Bruce and Tim and roughly shoved them apart, whirling to face his former mentor with a snarl. "Back off, Bruce. I mean it. Do you wanna give the kid a heart attack? Stop treating this like an interrogation!" Jason put his hands on Bruce's shoulders and forced him back several steps; he met barely any resistance. Bruce looked...Tim couldn't tell. "You're too close to this and you're panicking," Jason spat, disgust coloring his tone. "Take a fucking second to compose yourself." Why couldn't Tim tell?

Released from that iron grip, Tim's legs quivered and he slid to his knees in the doorway of the hall closet. That was weird. Why was the carpet wet? He stared at the empty water bottle on the floor beside him for several uncomprehending seconds before it clicked. That was his. He'd...dropped it? When? Why couldn't he seem to *think*?

He raised his head to apologize to Dick for the mess, but his view was obscured. Jason stood with his back to Tim, arms at his sides but not loose, planting himself between Bruce and Dick and the phantom of their imminent judgement. Protective.

Jason...wasn't angry. Even though Tim had lied. Or looked like a liar. Same difference.

"Deep breaths, kiddo," Jason tossed over his shoulder, warm and casual and on edge all at once. "It's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong, okay?"

Tim gave a jerky nod. "Um, natural and normal, right?" he echoed, head still caught between a weird fog and the thrum of *Jason's not mad, Jason doesn't hate him, Maybe there was someone still on his side—*

Jason didn't look back, but a note of fondness colored his tone when he answered, "Yeah, that's right."

He rolled his shoulders, took a deep breath, and straightened to face Tim's firing squad in his stead.

"His old man fucked him over," Jason asserted; Bruce and Dick twitched, either from the abrupt disclosure or because it was the first time Jason had addressed them without shouting since he'd arrived. "Ditched him in the middle of the city, with no money, at a restaurant with an unpaid bill. Took off in the car and canceled their hotel reservation without telling anyone." He shifted his posture, as though trying to further insinuate himself between Tim and the consequences of his actions. "Your bird logically concluded he'd been left behind, so he came home." Jason's hands curled into fists at his sides. "It's not his fault." He repeated.

The air trembled under the weight of the uneasy silence that followed. Tim focused on breathing like he'd been told to and resisted the urge to scoot back into the safety of the hall closet.

It didn't sound good.

Jason had tried to frame it favorably, but it still sounded awful and moronic and pathetic and like Tim was unfit to take care of himself as a civilian, let alone operate as a vigilante. But there was no helping that; this was all of the truth that could be said without throwing around accusations of intention.

Sympathy quickly ran dry whenever Tim tried to make these *situations* out to be anyone's fault but his own.

"I'm...so sorry, Tim. That sounds—" Dick began haltingly, care and confusion warring on his face.

"That sounds like a handy series of coincidences," Bruce interrupted, a note of suspicion curling savagely through his tone.

Something between a jolt of adrenaline and a swell of hope rattled up Tim's spine, snapping him back into the moment like a gunshot. All at once, he could feel the rough carpet beneath his hands, could feel the doorjamb against his back.

He stared at Bruce with a stark intensity, as though blinking might allow him to vanish.

No one had ever questioned the easy explanations Jack put forth about why Tim was late, why Tim was hurt, why a younger Tim was crying or scared or hungry or a million other things that had ceased to

matter once they had been firmly established as not Jack's fault.

Not a single person had ever even considered the possibility that Jack could just be *lying* to them.

None of those people had been the world's greatest detective.

"That's a very specific series of events that led Tim to a very specific conclusion." Bruce said coldly. Frustrated, angry, but *not at Tim*. "You said your charger was broken, but your phone is still in Georgia. Why?"

Tim didn't even bother asking how Batman knew *that*, didn't dare interrupt the flow. "It's broken. The phone, not the charger," he confessed breathlessly, heart thrumming. "My dad smashed it before he left. It wouldn't turn on, so I just left it in the restaurant." It was happening. He felt like a kid again, watching Batman solve a mystery.

"Can I see that?" Bruce stuck his hand out. And it wasn't the same thing. This was for an investigation. The phone wasn't even his. But placing it in Bruce's palm and *not* feeling scared felt more important than it should have.

Bruce scanned the email closely before requesting to see the first; Tim obliged. All the while, Bruce asked questions and Tim answered them as cleanly and objectively as he could. Facts only. Don't plant seeds. Don't put words in his mouth. If he figured it out on his own, if he could look at the evidence and *see* the truth, no one could accuse Tim of tricking him or lying to get sympathy. If Batman solved it, it was *real*.

"What was the time frame between your father leaving the restaurant and your reservation getting canceled?"

"Close to three hours."

"In what context did you find the email?"

"I was walking back to the hotel when I stopped by a library I'd seen the day before."

"Why did you stop?"

"I—I was cold."

On it went.

Eventually, Bruce heaved a sigh and handed the phone back to Tim. Looked at him carefully and asked, "Does Jack do this often, Tim?"

"Do what, Bruce?"

Come on, Batman. See me. Save me.

"Engage in this kind of manipulative behavior."

The air left his lungs in a desperate, giddy rush. "Yes. Constantly, all the time. And I'm not lying. I'm not."

"I know, Tim." Those hands reached toward him again and this time Tim met Bruce halfway and latched on, gripping those powerful forearms like a lifeline. That confession should have been enough, that was enough to answer Bruce's question, but it was as if every rotten uneasy misery he'd ever concealed was tumbling from his mouth, like he couldn't help but talk now, now that someone believed him, now that someone might finally *help*.

"I hate it. I have to hold two truths in my head at once for everything, the one that's true and the one that won't make my dad angry and it's awful because I never know what I'm allowed to say or what he's going to pretend never happened and it makes me feel like I'm *crazy* —"

"You're not crazy," Dick said immediately; Bruce hauled him to his feet and guided him over to the couch with barely any help from Tim at all.

The words kept coming: "—but most of the time I know and I just have to pretend I don't. I see it coming and I'm not allowed to sidestep or he'll be even angrier. He lies constantly about the most ridiculous things but no one ever believes me because he's an adult, and an adult wouldn't behave like that, but he does. All the time. Constantly, all the time." Tim was babbling, he knew he was, but he could help it.

He was on the couch now, and they were close. All of them. Listening to him. Believing him.

He took a deep breath in an attempt to compose himself as he started to wind down. "But this time...this was an off case. Usually, I can tell. I've never missed it so bad before. And it was so obvious, too. He never pulls anything he doesn't think he can get away with. I should have known."

Tim was trembling and he couldn't stop.

"Fucking evil." Jason's firm hands on shoulders were grounding. "All to trick you into traveling home by yourself? What's the fucking *point*?"

"You had an argument with your dad before he took off, right?" Dick cut in, eyes fixed on Tim with a keen, steady intelligence.

Tim blinked, "Yeah, but he definitely didn't intend for me to go back to Gotham. Look how he's acting now."

Jason nodded. "Even if they buy that *running away* story, you being here at all makes him look suspicious as hell."

"It happened really fast." Tim said, as though it wasn't burned into his memory. As though he hadn't been going over it in his head since the moment it had happened. "We had the fight, and he smashed my phone, and I didn't want to follow him because he still seemed angry, and..."

"...and you were scared of what he might do," Bruce said softly.

"But I'm Robin." Tim protested weakly.

"As a parent, he has tangible legal, societal, and social power over you that you can't combat by being Robin," Bruce continued in a low tone. "Being Robin does not protect you from the abuse of that power."

His dad wasn't a nice guy, but that seemed like a little much. "He's a jerk, sure, but this is probably the worst thing he's done. I made it home fine."

Jason poked him on the side of the head. "I don't care if he pretended to abandon you in your fucking backyard, okay? I don't care if you're Robin. You didn't have your wallet, or your phone, or even a fucking coat, Tim. That's neglect and endangerment."

"He might not have even known my phone wasn't working." Tim said haltingly, trying not to look at the shameful, horrible possibility that was slowly dawning in his peripheral vision. "I mean, I didn't know until after he left." He swallowed. "He. He didn't want me to come back to Gotham. If I wasn't Robin, I wouldn't have dared. He..."

Suddenly, it felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room, and Tim *got it*.

“He wanted me to call him for help,” Tim burst out in a sickening rush. “And he’d say that he’d already left. He wanted to hear my reaction.”

That had to be it.

Jason swore and immediately stalked away from the rest of them, fists curling and uncurling as he visibly struggled to get himself under control. “That bastard,” he snarled, “wanted to strand you in public and make you *beg*?”

“And the longer it took to call,” Tim whispered with a shiver, “the angrier he got.” Ergo, the switched rooms. The emails. All to make sure Tim *got the message*.

Kids these days, so dependent. Unbidden, the words swam into the forefront of his mind. *Guess he still needs his old man for something, right?*

“He was trying to teach me a lesson, I think.” Tim whispered. “I embarrassed him in public and he wanted to give me a taste of my own medicine.”

Letting him know that Jack was angry and could do whatever he wanted. Letting him know that there wasn't a damn thing Tim could do about it.

Reminding me to be grateful he’s willing to deal with me at all.

All this, because he hadn’t made a fool of himself for Jack's ego.

All this, because he hadn't given Jack the fucking *validation* he’d wanted.

And suddenly Tim was crying, ugly and noisy and pathetic; like before, he couldn't seem to stop, but this time it didn't feel anything at all like relief.

“I wish—I wish he’d just *left*,” Tim gasped between sobs. “I wish he’d just left me there, because then there might have been a reason. He might have just had something come up that was more important than me.” The arms that immediately wrapped around him felt like the only thing holding him together.

“Tim—”

"He did this on purpose to hurt me! There was no other reason!"

Dick was pressed against Tim's side, holding him tightly; Bruce had his wrists still trapped in that desperate, protective grip; Jason was braced against the back of the couch with his hands firm and steady on Tim's shoulders.

It was something novel, to find himself bracketed by these three titans of his childhood. To feel safe enough to finally demand to know, "Why does he hate me so much? What's wrong with me?"

Warmth bracketed him from all sides as he cried it out, and Tim calmed down, slowly.

As he came around, he found that he was promptly and entirely *sick* of lying.

"You know." Tim said, and stopped.

They waited, warm and present and listening.

"I didn't tell the whole truth, earlier. I'd suspected he'd left the city when I saw the car was gone," Tim announced. "That's why I stopped at the library. I'm sorry for lying, but I wanted your conclusion to be objective." That was it. That was the last thing. "It wasn't my intention to mislead you—"

"Cut it out." Jason poked him hard in the thigh, cutting him off with a rusty squeak. "You are so far from the bad guy in this situation it's not even funny. You knowing your dad was evil and expecting him to pull some shit does not make you in any way culpable, okay?"

"Okay."

And Jason, damn him, pulled another damn towelette from somewhere and had another go at Tim's face. He tried to dodge, but Dick wouldn't let him squirm out of the way.

"Traitor," Tim hissed.

Dick squeezed him a little tighter. "I'm just glad you're okay. If Jason hadn't found you when he did..." he dropped his head onto Tim's shoulder with a weary sigh. "As far as I'm concerned, he can do what he wants."

"Don't you think you're giving him a little too much credit?" Tim

argued over Jason's victorious hoot. "I was heading here anyway. I had a plan, you know."

"About that, Tim," Bruce cut in. "You had your watch for at least part of your trip." Bruce inclined his head towards Jason's wrist, because of course he'd noticed. "Why didn't you use it to call for help?"

Why didn't you call me, he didn't say. He didn't have to.

"I didn't know if you would, um..." No, not going there. Tim shook his head and began again. "The watch is for Robin," he stated firmly. "This wasn't a Robin problem."

But they'd been a team for a long time now, the two of them, and Bruce could read Tim about as well as Tim could read Bruce. Their ability to process one another's minute twitches and expressions without a word passing between them made them a formidable duo in combat, but it didn't just end when they stepped out of the shadows.

Bruce knew Tim. Tim knew Bruce. It was an immutable fact.

As a result, Tim could pinpoint the exact moment he processed what Tim had intentionally left unsaid.

And Tim saw with perfect clarity the moment something in Bruce's expression quietly shattered.

Suddenly, without knowing quite how he had ended up there, Tim was on his feet.

He could barely believe it. Somehow, without even trying, he'd already fucked it up.

"Sorry, I, uh, I need to—" he couldn't think of anything. Certainly no one would buy that he had anywhere to go right now.

"I've been an awful host." Dick interrupted, words accompanied by a hollow imitation of a sheepish grin. "You came all this way. Do you need anything? Something to eat? A shower?"

Tim suddenly felt both every speck of grime and filth and sweat coating him like a second skin as well as immeasurably grateful towards his brother. "Shower, please," he latched onto the chance he'd been given.

Dick pointed him in the direction of the bathroom, still sporting that

painfully fake grin. "Sounds good. I'll rustle you up a towel and something to wear."

Tim all but ran from the room.

After Tim left, Bruce seemed to shrivel. The door clicked shut and it was like he'd turned to stone, growing still on Dick's ratty couch with a finality that implied he might just stay there until he died.

Jason grabbed a dish towel and threw it over the spill in front of the coat closet.

Dick, after sharing a few sparse words with Tim through the closed door (not enough. Not nearly enough) was at a loss. Quietly desperate for something to do with his hands, he began digging around for his old kettle, making as much noise as possible. After unearthing it and putting it on to boil, he just stood there, seething into the quiet, unsteady air of his foyer until he couldn't stand it for a second longer.

"What if Tim wasn't Robin?" Dick's sharp remark pierced the icy silence uncaringly, making the other two men start. "A kid in a strange city, no money, no phone, hundreds of miles away from anyone they knew?" He wrenched the pantry door open with more force than necessary. "I can't stop thinking about it."

A rough, low croak came from behind him. "Dick. You don't need to —"

"How long do you think it would have gone on?" Dick snapped, having suddenly and overwhelmingly *had it* with how calm everyone was acting. "Until Tim cried, definitely, but what would he have made him say and do for the *privilege* of not being left to fend for himself?" The mug he was wiping down cracked in his tight grip, and he threw it aside, pulling another down from the cabinet. "His *dad* was in the same building, right? Do you think he would have come downstairs to watch the show?"

The silence still hung there, and it still hurt, but at least the rest of them could feel it now. At least it wasn't just Dick.

"Do you think he would have said anything?" Bruce asked no one, faint and hopeful and bitterly pessimistic. "Once he'd come home?"

Of course he would, was what Dick wanted to say. Tim knows he can trust us, he's smart enough to know it wasn't right or fair or normal.

But he'd lived with this his entire life, hadn't he? For Tim, this was normal. And...

And what kind of adults, Dick thought suddenly, *had Tim had contact with before becoming Robin?*

His dad's friends? The housekeeper? He'd never had a babysitter. Maybe teachers, but hadn't Tim switched schools constantly as a kid?

All people who would be well informed, courtesy of Jack, about what to *expect* from Tim before ever even meeting him. And the Tim they'd learn about would be one carefully designed to suit Jack's little narrative, smart enough to make Jack proud, but hapless enough to make Jack look clever. To make him look *innocent*.

"Did you see how he was looking at us?" Dick demanded instead. "After everything we've been through together, he was *convinced* we wouldn't believe him."

It all made a sick sort of sense.

"Jack really didn't like Tim spending time with you at the manor," Dick said after a long moment, "Did he?"

"No." The answer was barely more than a grunt.

"Didn't that ever strike you as strange?" Dick spat, a fresh and sudden anger curling hot in his gut. "The lengths he took to cut Tim off from adults who might help him?"

Not even a grunt in response this time, but that was answer enough.

"This shouldn't have happened." Dick grabbed another mug. "He's—he's *Robin*."

"What, you think that makes him invincible?" Jason cut in, as blasé as could be. But of course *he* didn't feel guilty. This wasn't his fault.

Regardless, when Dick whirled on him, Jason actually took a step back.

Everyone in the room had been avoiding making eye contact with Jason since he'd arrived and all for wildly different reasons, so not being treated like a *ghost* probably caught him off guard.

"He should have stood more of a *chance*!" Dick yelled at his brother. "Being Robin is supposed to mean he's not alone! He's got me. He's got

Bruce, and Alfred, and that team of his. He's had the necessary crisis training. He should have been safe, and this almost happened anyway!" The handle of the mug came off in his shaking hands, and he set it on the counter with a dull *clunk*. "It was happening anyway."

Sweeping the broken ceramic to the side, he abandoned his task in the kitchen to stalk over to Bruce and *force* eye contact. Better to give him his answer.

"If he wasn't here, he'd be with his dad, because he would have just let the whole thing happen to him without saying a word," Dick spat, begging Bruce to react. To do anything. *Feel* anything. "He would have started doing damage control the second the truth came out. He'd protect Jack and then he'd come back and not say a word about it to any of us. Just like he's been protecting him this whole time."

There was an uneasy silence before Bruce stiffly intoned, "He's not there. He's here." As if that was the end of it.

"Not the *fucking* point, Bruce." Dick left him to his misery and went to check on the kettle. "Or just—What if he hadn't stopped? Just headed back to the hotel on his own, expecting his dad to be waiting for him? And then he can't get into his room, and he can't find his dad, and..." Dick leaned his elbows on the counter and pressed his face into his hands, taking deep meditative breaths that did nothing to ease the tension coiled in every ache of his body. "I can't stop thinking about him sitting in some hotel lobby, miles from all of us, begging that—that *sadist* not to abandon him."

"Dick—"

"Why didn't he tell me the truth? Why didn't he—" Dick paced the kitchen like a jaguar in a cage, hands buried in his own hair, grasping, tugging. "No. I should have known."

"Dick." Jason said, without the rough edge his tone so often took these days. "He wasn't telling anybody."

"That's not good enough!" Dick pulled down another mug from the cabinet and slammed it on the counter. "Not noticing this, not watching him closely enough to be able to see what was going on—It wasn't his job to tell us. We should have known. We should have made him feel like he could trust us, not like he had to do this by himself—"

"Dick," Bruce started, with that *dad* tone of his, like he was trying to take care of Dick right now. Normally, Dick tried to work with him

when he reached out, tried to meet him halfway, but right now it made his blood boil.

Because this wasn't about Dick's *feelings*, this was about Tim, this was about—

"This is exactly how we let Jason die," Dick spat. "And I don't know about you, but I don't want another dead teenager on my conscience."

The silence is deafening.

Jason had dropped both his towel and the pretense that he was cleaning anything, and stared at Dick with open-mouthed shock.

Bruce soaked in the words and anger with a familiar tightlipped misery, no doubt absorbing them into the martyr's monument he'd constructed within himself long before Dick had ever met him.

But he didn't look surprised; rather, he looked almost as though he'd been waiting for it. Or had been thinking the exact same thing himself.

The anger that had fueled Dick thus far was engulfed and surpassed in a sudden, vicious swell of shame.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I. I didn't mean that. I'm— I just—" Dick wrung his hands, feeling wretched. Exhausted. Cold. "I *swore* I was gonna do better this time. I'm sorry. I can't do this right now. Tim needs me. I have to—" He didn't know. He had no idea what to do.

They all jumped as a shrill whistle cut through the air and the tension both.

"Your water's hot," Jason said helpfully, ringing his rag out directly over the damp spot in the carpet.

Dick needed to keep it together. He rolled his shoulders. Didn't meet a single eye in the room as he stiffly inquired, "Does anyone want tea."

When in doubt, basic good manners are always there to fall back on. Thanks, Alfred.

Bruce, predictably, said nothing.

"Ah, what the hell," Jason sighed and, to Dick's shock, joined him in the kitchen and began rifling through cabinets. "Where do you keep your mugs? Other than the ones you smashed, I mean."

Despite himself, a small smile quirked at the corner of his mouth. "Smash is a strong word."

It felt better to have him here, even when Dick sometimes had to study him carefully to pick out the details this man had in common with his little brother.

He didn't have to look very closely at all, right now. This *felt* like Jason.

"You're a wreck. When's the last time you slept, huh?"

Dick shrugged half-heartedly, swaying closer to Jason than he might have if he was thinking more clearly. If he hadn't spent the last—however long. hours? days?—half out of his mind with worry.

It felt good to have Jason warm and busy and broad-shouldered beside him, peering at the little labels on boxes and commenting on his teas. It felt *grounding* in a way nothing had since he'd first received Tim's message.

"He was coming to you for help, Dickie." Jason said eventually. "That matters."

Dick swallowed, throat tight.

A firm hand gripped his shoulder, briefly, before releasing. "You didn't make the same mistake twice."

"You were just a kid."

"My death wasn't your fault."

"But your safety was my responsibility. You were a *kid*."

"There's only enough room for one martyr in this family, Dickhead—"

"—that is *categorically* untrue—"

"—and I'm pretty sure the old man has it on lockdown for the foreseeable future."

Dick winced and resisted the urge to glance guiltily at their unmoving father, instead choosing to clear his throat and change the subject. "How'd you find him?"

To Dick's surprise, Jason let out a small laugh. "Complete accident,

would you believe it? He was train hopping home in civvies, the little scamp. We ran into each other somewhere near eastern Kentucky.” The smile slipped slightly. “To be honest, I gave him a bit of a hard time until I realized some shit was going down.”

"How was he, when you found him?"

"In bad shape, no getting around it, but he could have been doing a lot worse. He's tougher than I thought he'd be, for a little rich kid. Emphasis on *little*." Jason shook his head with a huff. "I swear you and I were never that small."

Dick resisted the urge to say *you were, you were and I will never forget it*, because this conversation, this opportunity, seemed so impossibly delicate and he didn't want to risk messing it up.

Instead, he elbowed his brother in the side and smiled. "Careful there, Jay. People are gonna think you've gone soft."

"Who, me?" Jason grinned. "Always."

They worked in silence for a long moment, before Jason rolled his eyes and sighed. "Old man! Do you or do you not want some fucking tea?" When no answer came, Jason surprised Dick by laughing to himself. "God. I forgot what *babies* the two of you could be. Time's up!" He yelled over his shoulder. "You're getting tea whether you like it or not!"

And he pulled down a third mug and busied himself preparing another cup, setting it to steep, checking with it periodically while readying his own.

Dick stared.

Jason ignored him and headed for the living room, where he plunked Dick's ugliest mug down on the coffee table in front of Bruce. "Think you could take a raincheck on martyring yourself to death, old man? There's shit to do."

Bruce shifted in his seat, the stillness around him cracking like the thinnest sheet of ice as he reached out to accept the gift, cradling the mug tenderly in both hands. Belatedly, Dick realized this was the first time he'd moved, actually moved, since Tim had left the room.

"That was quick."

"Black tea. Me and Dickie are having herbal. Steeps longer, you know."

"Yes. I know." Bruce took a long, slow sip of the still-steaming drink, giving every appearance of savoring it.

Jason squinted at him suspiciously.

Bruce took another sip. "Thank you, Jason."

"You're a filthy liar. That *can't* be ingestible."

Bruce raised his eyebrows at Jason over the lip of his mug.

Jason snatched it from his hands and took a gulp himself, which he promptly spat out all over Dick's coffee table.

Of course.

"What did you do to it?" Dick asked wryly.

"Cayenne pepper, cumin, cream of tartar, and...paprika, I think?" Bruce guessed, taking the mug gracefully back from a theatrically retching Jason. "You know, some people put paprika in their tea on purpose. It adds a smokiness." He took another sip, expression unchanging.

"You're not human." Jason accused. Dick, taking pity, snagged a bottle of water from the case in the kitchen and tossed it to him. Jason promptly cracked it open and chugged half.

"I didn't say I liked it." Bruce explained. "I'm going for the long con."

Jason made a quizzical sound.

"In regards to martyring myself to death." Bruce clarified. "Because there's shit to do."

This actually surprised a laugh out of Jason, who, after a moment of deliberation, settled back onto the couch beside Bruce.

He always had gotten a kick out of subverting people's expectations, hadn't he?

Bruce stared at Jason for several moments before allowing his gaze to drift morosely down to the depths of his mug. "I don't know how to fix this," he said finally.

"That's the problem with you, old man. You're too big picture." Jason nudged him. "You don't need to overhaul everything you've ever said or done to the kid; you need to correct a misconception."

Bruce looked up. "You think so?"

Despite all the bad blood between them, they seemed oddly at home on the couch together, picking apart Bruce's lackluster people skills. Dick wondered, suddenly, if this wasn't the first version of this conversation they'd had. If they'd talked like this back when Jason had lived at the manor, when Bruce and Dick weren't speaking.

Shaking his head as if to clear it, Dick stopped putting off the inevitable and approached the couch with a pair of steaming mugs, settling into the cushion on Jason's other side; he popped an single ice cube into a drink as he handed it over, and Jason took it with an odd kind of nervousness, something like a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Dick blew on his own tea half-heartedly. "You always drank it too fast. I didn't want you to burn your mouth."

Jason tilted his mug from side to side gently, watching the little cube tumble over itself as it rapidly shrank. "Yeah. Thanks."

Carefully, Dick reached over and slipped another ice cube into Bruce's tea as well. A silent apology. It earned him a smile.

Dick sighed, took a sip of his own tea, and promptly burned his mouth.

Jason had definitely noticed, if the bright smirk and the way he was turning in his seat to face Dick more fully was any indication.

Before he could speak, however, a soft intake of breath from the other end of the couch caught their attention. Bruce's eyes were glued to the back of the enormous, ridiculous sweatshirt Jason was wearing as though he couldn't bear to tear his eyes away.

"Those clothes. Jason...are you..." he whispered, something painfully fragile in his expression. "Are you getting your English major?"

Jason locked down as visibly and resolutely as if he'd put that damn helmet on.

"No." He said curtly. "I bought these off some jersey shop so I could

conceal military-grade weapons on public transportation.”

The tension in the room bracketed up several notches. It was as if they'd all forgotten, for a moment, the people they'd become.

Then, quieter, Jason scoffed, “I didn't even finish high school.”

From where he was sitting, Dick could see how Bruce's hands shook around his mug.

No one said anything after that.

Tim stepped out of the bathroom feeling much more like himself. Hair wet, but not dripping, face clean, dressed in a-touch-too-large clothing courtesy of Dick Grayson.

With, of course, Jason's leather jacket rolled under his arm (maybe it had been an underhanded move, bringing it into the bathroom to prevent Jason from just taking off again, but. He seemed like he was doing better, and working alone was clearly too dangerous. He'd come all this way. He'd helped Tim. It had to mean something, right?) and finally, *finally*, something resembling a plan.

Things were tense in the main area. Every single one of them looked a different shade of haunted...But were all, to the letter, squeezed onto Dick's tiny couch, drinking tea together like old ladies.

How long had Tim been gone?

They all snapped to attention at his entrance. Tim straightened his already neat clothing and drew himself up to his full height. “Hey guys. First off, I want to apologize. That was incredibly unprofessional.”

This was a very bad way to start this conversation, because every single one of them got up to yell at him. Shit, was Dick crying?

“Never mind, never mind! I'm taking it back. Don't yell at me! We can argue about whether I'm poorly adjusted later, because right now this situation needs to be resolved!”

Tim steeled himself. “I want to say: Thank you for believing me. It means,” he swallowed, “everything. But this isn't like, um, normal bad parent stuff. It's hard to track and nearly impossible to prove. I've played this game before; no one is going to believe it, Bruce. I know.

I've tried. The work and time it would take to convince someone with the power to help that something bad was actually occurring—it would draw an incredible amount of attention. As would you,” he looked at Jason, “going in guns blazing.” Everyone except Jason winced, including Tim. “Uh, proverbial. Proverbial guns blazing.”

“Boo,” said Jason from the couch. Dick kicked him.

“There isn't a quick way out of this through any legal channels, so.” Tim bit the bullet. “I think...maybe we should reconsider sending me back to Atlanta.”

And they were yelling at him again, but this time Bruce stalked over into Tim's space. “Absolutely not. I promised you that wouldn't happen.”

Tim stood his ground. “I know how this works, Bruce. You don't. I don't need to be coddled. This is my dad, my problem. I can handle it; I've done it before! I don't need help.” He curled his hands into his fists to prevent them from visibly trembling. “Thank you for believing. *That's enough for me.* I'll be fine until the trip is over. And,” he added, “Maybe we can do something about it after I get home. But right now? Our hands are tied.”

“Tim, I know what you are capable of. I get that you could handle this yourself. We don't want you to handle this by yourself.”

“I'm not a child, Bruce. This is the best way to protect our identities.”

“Tim! I am not trying to protect our identities, I am trying to protect you!” Bruce was nearly shouting. “You are my number one priority. Your safety is my number one priority.”

Tim had no idea how to respond.

“Listen to me,” he continued more gently. “There are people who love you who want to take care of you. Please let them.”

Tim took a breath to argue, but—

“I believe you, Tim. I believe you, and I promise that will be enough to *get you out of this situation.* I don't want your dad anywhere near you ever again. I don't want him in Gotham. That's my endgame. Is that all right with you?”

Tim hesitated for a long moment before haltingly admitting, “I don't

want to see him. I don't want anyone to kill him, or hurt him, or anything. But I don't want to see him." Just saying it felt like confessing to murder.

Bruce just nodded. "I thought that might be the case. Now. Because you and I began this venture with different goals in mind, executing both operations simultaneously will likely lead to us working against each other. I don't want that. I therefore request, Robin, that you defer to my experience and allow me to proceed with my plan uninhibited. Tim," Bruce implored. "Will you promise to let me handle this?"

"But what about Batman and Robin?" It sounded weak. He knew it did.

Bruce laid a firm hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "Let me worry about Batman and Robin."

Coming from anyone else, it would have felt dismissive. But from Bruce? It was a genuinely reassuring thing to hear.

"Okay." Tim nodded, steeling himself. "Okay. Let's go with your thing, then."

Bruce's shoulders visibly drooped with relief. It occurred to Tim, for the first time, that Batman was probably having a pretty terrible day.

"We," Bruce announced with the air of a weary commander, "are going back to Gotham. Jason?" Jason was, in the meantime, trying to creep out of the apartment unnoticed, coat be damned. Upon being addressed, his shoulders started to creep up to his ears defensively.

Bruce surprised them all by tossing him the keys. "Will you drive?"

Jason blinked, looking young and surprised and a little excited before remembering to put his coolguy routine back on.

He shrugged his shoulders, swung the ring around his finger once, then twice, nonchalant as anything. "Sure, old man. I'll drive."

It wasn't technically a trick because Bruce hadn't said he'd be driving the Batmobile; however, Jason's displeasure was clear as three of them shuffled into the backseat of a modest 1990 Toyota Corolla. He had seriously considered ditching them all to go steal something cooler from a nearby parking garage, and took great pains to tell them so.

As it was, he resisted the urge, but grumbled all the way from the lot to the parkway.

“It’s not so bad,” Tim offered from the back seat, “I think there’s a tape deck.”

“Right. Yeah. Of course.” Jason snorted. “Who needs a rocket launcher when you’ve got *Barry Manilow* to save Gotham?”

Tim was squished between the other two in the backseat; Bruce’s knees were hitched up against the seat in front of him because Jason refused to scoot his seat forward.

Bruce squinted at the screen of his phone, muttering to himself and typing one-handed. His other arm was thrown snugly around Tim’s shoulders, keeping him close.

Dick, pressed up against his other side, was squinting blearily at his own phone. It was a tight fit, with all three of them in the backseat, and was made all the tighter by this newfound clinginess. One of them could have at least taken the front seat. Did they think he was going to make a break for it?

A series of sharp pings from the right side of the car made Tim jump.

“Sorry, sorry,” Dick jolted, hurriedly adjusting the sound. “I forgot to update the Titans.”

“The Titans?” Tim blinked. “You told the Titans?”

“We were prepping for a mission when your message came through.” Dick laughed at the expression on his face. “Don’t worry too much about it. They’re big boys and girls; they do just fine without me there.”

“But a *Titans mission*—”

“Tim, *stop*. It’s my policy that I don’t go off-world when family’s in trouble.” Dick said, ruffling Tim’s hair. “They know that. They understand.”

The Titans had lived through Jason’s death too, hadn’t they? They’d seen what it had done to Dick.

What a mess.

Bruce distracted him then, pulling Tim closer to press a kiss into his

hair. He was saying something.

"—trouble finding it?"

Tim realized with a start that he was in the middle of a phone call. "Already? No, good, good. Impeccable work, as always. Thank you."

Then Bruce leaned close again and murmured, "Selina says hi," into Tim's hair before pulling away.

"Hi, Selina," Tim said into the air. Not knowing what *else* to do.

They drove in relative peace, with Bruce fielding more mysterious calls (and periodically passing along greetings and well-wishes), Dick jerking awake to stare intently at Tim every few miles, and Jason swearing at any particularly inept motorists he encountered. By the end, though, Tim was starting to feel a little suffocated, so finally reaching the Manor was a relief.

They trooped inside like men coming home from war. Jason was looking around with an odd mix of grief and wonder in his eyes. Dick was shuffling like a zombie.

Tim kept his eyes forward and his mind sharp.

After situating Dick on the sitting room sofa (just as exhaustion threatened to take him right off his feet), and after sending Jason on a snack run (to the part of the manor most likely to put him in Alfred's path), Tim took the stairs two at a time up to the bedroom.

His bedroom.

The one he stayed in when he got hurt during late night patrols. The one he'd used in secret after getting kicked out.

He breathed in deeply. The air was clean and dust free, despite the fact that he hadn't been back in over a month.

Walking over to the desk, Tim pulled the camera bag from his shoulder. He plugged in his camera to charge, and beside it laid down his single remaining stick of cinnamon gum; beside that, the toothbrush.

He pulled free his maps and papers and laid them out in the middle of the desk, ordering and smoothing them the best he could.

He unwound the burlap from around his wrist and peeked inside. The

apples weren't in great shape, but they'd mostly survived the trip. Gently placing them to the side, he made a mental note to ask Alfred later if anything could be made from them.

Stepping away from the desk, Tim resisted the powerful urge to curl up in bed and let the day be over.

He couldn't possibly. There was still work to do.

Tim took one last, long look at *his room* before he steeled his nerves and set off in search of Bruce.

Bruce was, surprisingly, exactly where he said he'd be: in his study.

One of his studies, at least, but Tim knew he liked the third floor east wing for hostage negotiations and had taken a gamble.

Tim went in through a fourth floor balcony, lowering himself on a grapple so that he was right outside a high window looking down into the room.

Very few windows at Wayne Manor could be opened from the outside without setting off an alarm, but this one counted among that number for the specific reason that Tim liked listening in on hostage negotiations.

Bruce was stock still in the middle of the room, phone in hand.

The gentle beeps as he input a phone number were impossibly loud in the otherwise silent room.

It rang.

Someone picked up.

Tim did *not* jump, but only because he was hanging upside down outside a window.

"Hello, Jack. Are you alone? At the hotel, hmm? Still no word?"

He pulled the phone away from his ear and muted the call.

"Oracle, confirm?" Bruce plugged an unknown device into the charge port of his own phone and said, "Okay. Cut him off."

He unmuted the call.

“Hello, Jack. Tim is here with me. You are,” and Brucie Wayne slipped, for a single, lethal second, “*singularly* fortunate that he is unharmed.”

The program the call was running through now did a number on the audio, because this time Tim could hear his father’s response crisp and clear.

“With you? You mean in Gotham? Of all the fucking—wait. What’s with that tone you’re taking with me? Bruce, don’t tell me you’re buying whatever bullshit he’s feeding you. Whatever he’s claiming, he’s just trying to get out of trouble. You know how boys are.”

And Tim knew. Tim knew Bruce knew. But for a second, for just a single second, he held his breath.

"Funny you should say that, Jack, because Tim didn’t accuse you of a goddamn thing." Bruce started to prowl slowly around the room as he gave his answer. Moving in a wide circle, deathly silent, eyes fixed in the middle distance as he spoke. "I've come to my own conclusions on why he's here, why he's in the shape he's in, and what your hand in all this might be." The lack of furniture, Tim knew, was why he liked the room for taking calls. More room to pace.

The light tone of his voice, perfectly maintained after his slip, was in wild contrast to his stormy demeanor. "But, you know, Tim isn't exactly what I'm calling to talk to you about! Let's cut to the chase, shall we?" Bruce smiled. "You’re in bed with Oswald Cobblepot."

“What!? I’m— I’m not—”

Brucie tsked. “Don’t play dumb, Jack. You’ve been taking loans from him ever since Drake industries went under. I also happen to know about a particular item left currently being held by Mr. Cobblepot as collateral: A jade tiger that Janet was particularly fond of before her untimely passing. Very tragic. Very valuable.”

There was a brief pause before Jack responded. “*What about it?*”

“Why, I’m afraid it’s been stolen, Jack. And word on the street is that you’re behind it.”

“No.”

“That you’ve run off with Cobblepot’s money *and* your statue—”

"No! That's not—"

"—And left several generous tips to the GCPD on Cobblepot's activities, besides." Bruce clucked his tongue. "Dangerous work to have a change of heart in, Jack, but I'm sure the city of Gotham appreciates your sacrifice."

This time, there was a long silence before Jack spoke again. *"I don't understand. What am I supposed to do?"* Tim had never heard his father's voice sound so small before.

"You'll have to move, I'm afraid." Bruce told him cheerfully. "And keep moving."

"What is this—What do you want from me!?"

"I'm going to be sending you an email. It will contain the forms necessary, as assessed by my lawyers, to sign away your current status as Tim's legal guardian and transfer him to my custody."

"...you want the boy?" The disbelief in Jack's tone rankled, even now.

"I do." Bruce answered simply.

"So what, I sign him over and all this just goes away?"

"Oh no, Jack. You're never coming back to Gotham." Bruce said, tone carefully and devastatingly flippant. "If you sign and send it back within the hour, I won't tell Cobblepot your exact location."

Jack's response was the longest silence so far, but this time, he broke it himself, cursing and screaming incoherent threats.

Tim flinched at the cacophony despite himself.

Bruce pulled the phone a few inches away from his ear before replying. "Come now, it's not so bad. You've got funds, you've got a car...you've got a nice warm coat, I bet. More than Tim had." Bruce's tone flattened out into something harder. "He really is an exceptional boy; shame you never got to learn that about him."

"You won't get away with this. This is a conspiracy. This is entrapment! I'll go to the papers, tell them Bruce Wayne is in with the mob, or that you—that you—"

"What?" Bruce said derisively, abandoning airs entirely. "That I've been sitting on secret mob connections for decades, only to reveal

myself in my master plan to steal a teenager that you lost in the first place? Or perhaps you think I put on a catsuit and robbed Cobblepot myself.”

Jack said nothing.

“It’s quite a story, Jack.” Bruce’s face twisted into something unkind, and his tone dripped cruel, cold mockery. “Tell me: Do you really think anyone is going to believe you?”

He hung up.

Tim shoved the window the rest of the way open and poked his head into the room. “Custody, huh?” He called, mostly for the opportunity to startle Batman.

He felt the slightest bit guilty at the way Bruce immediately paled. “Tim,” he said. “I didn’t want you to see that.”

“It’s okay.” Tim reassured him. “I know you’re not...you lie for different reasons. If you wanted to hurt me, you could just do it with your hands.”

Bruce, forced to crane his neck back in order to keep Tim in sight, paled impossibly further. “I wouldn’t—I’d *never*—”

“No, no, I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry.” Tim blanched. “There’s nowhere for this conversation to go, I think. Can we start this over?”

Bruce waved him on, looking uncharacteristically nervous.

Planting his feet on either side of the window and pushing off to gather momentum, Tim swung into the house and executed a sharp, controlled flip. He landed less than a foot from Bruce, his precision as accurate as always.

But there was a sharp intake of breath, and a pair hands locking on to his arms a moment before his feet touched the ground. Almost as though Batman had tried to catch him. Tim looked into his mentor’s wan face for a moment, taking in the details. He’d really put him through the wringer today, hadn’t he?

“I can take care of myself, you know.” Tim said with a small grin, half-boasting, half-reassuring.

“I know.” Bruce answered, quietly fond. “You are frustratingly good at

it."

"Um, what you did. With the call." Tim looked at his feet. "That was...thank you. There were easier ways. But appreciate you trying to...make it fair."

"I'm not a saint, Tim. I did it mostly for you, but a little for me, too. Or didn't you know?" Was that a twinkle in his eye? "*Nobody* messes with my kids and gets away with it."

Tim laughed.

Bruce rested his hands on his shoulders, firm and warm, and didn't pick them up.

"To answer your question, yes. I will be taking custody of you in the meantime, at least temporarily. If there is someone else you'd rather live with, or if you'd prefer to emancipate once the option becomes available, we could pursue those avenues together. Or, if you wanted," His tone was carefully neutral, "you could continue to stay with me."

The words made Tim's heart pick up. He reeled for a second, giddy, but no. Now was not the time for baseless optimism. He needed to be sure.

"Do you want me?" Tim demanded.

"I...don't want my feelings to influence your decision. You should do what *you* want."

Tim shook his head. "I can't have another parent who doesn't want me, Bruce. If I get a choice this time, I'm not just going to—to hope, or guess. I need you to tell me, right now, do you want me to pick you? If you could," he faltered slightly, but forced himself to finish, "would you pick me?"

"Yes, I would." Bruce told him. "I want you very, very much, Tim. In my home, in my life, and as a part of my family."

"Okay, then. Good." Tim resolutely blinked back tears. "Good. Me too."

"Now, Tim—"

Tim refused. "No way. No lectures while we're having a moment—"

"—about what you said earlier. At Dick's apartment. Before your

shower?"

Oh. Tim winced. *That.* "Bruce, I'm really sorry."

"Tim." The tone brokered no argument. "Son. Please don't apologize. I am sick to death of you putting your health and safety at risk to protect my feelings. I need to clear up a...misunderstanding. One I didn't realize existed between the two of us."

He crouched, so that Tim had to look down at him to maintain eye contact, but still didn't take his hands off Tim's shoulders. "You are more important to me than Robin, Tim Drake. You don't have to be Robin in order for me to care about you. Your problems do not have to stem from Robin in order for them to be important. Robin is a job, a title. You are a person I care about. If you stopped being Robin right now and told me you never wanted to fight crime again, you would still have a place here. "

Tim swallowed around the lump in his throat. "I don't want to stop being Robin," he said, mostly because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Then don't. But do you understand what I'm saying?"

Tim nodded.

"Second." More gruffly, more businesslike. Tim let out a tiny sigh of relief. This was a Bruce he knew how to deal with, at least. "The Lost Robin Rules absolutely apply in a civilian crisis. It was my mistake to not make that more clear."

"Sorry, Batman." Tim's grin was all cheek. "Won't happen again."

"It's all right, Robin."

Batman melted away, and Bruce visibly steeled himself before resuming eye contact. "One last thing, Tim. I want you to know: If you had contacted me and told me what had happened, I would have taken whatever methods necessary, civilian or vigilante, to reach you as soon as possible. In the meantime, I would have called Clark, and your speedster friend, Bart, and asked them to wait with you until I got there. I would not have left you alone."

Tim's mouth was suddenly dry. "Why are you telling me this?"

"You said that you didn't know what I would have done, so I'm telling

you. I want you to know that, if you need me, I will always do everything in my power to be there.”

For a moment, neither of them even breathed.

"Did you need me, Tim?"

Wordlessly, desperately, Tim gave a single, slow nod. He was trembling.

Bruce squeezed his shoulders. "I'm sorry for not being there."

Tim stared at him, absolutely frozen. A small, hiccupping gasp escaped from his mouth.

"Tim?" Bruce said, alarmed.

"No, I'm fine. It's just..." Tim shrugged with a wet little laugh, "It's not even your fault. Why would you—" he broke off, rubbing his eyes. "You're just being really nice."

Bruce blinked. "I'm not sorry because I'm nice, Tim."

Shaking his head, Tim took a shuddering breath and choked out, "Sometimes it feels like you're the closest thing to a real parent I've ever had." And then, softly, silently, he began to cry.

"Oh, *buddy*," Bruce said, and pulled him into a hug with a tenderness that nearly hurt.

Tim wiped at his eyes, trying to hide the evidence. "I'm sorry, I'm—I think I'm just tired. I don't know why I'm—"

"Don't apologize," Bruce shushed, steering him bodily over to the single couch in the study where it sat huddled against the far wall. He sat beside Tim without releasing his grip. "It's perfectly natural; you've borne an unbelievable amount of stress today."

"I've borne an unbelievable amount of crying today, you mean," Tim responded, putting his face in his hands.

A clock somewhere in the manor chimed the top of the hour; Tim wrapped his arms around his middle and shivered.

"It's over," he whispered after a long, long moment, "isn't it? I really don't have to see him again."

"It's over." Bruce confirmed, and it felt a little bit like whatever strings had allowed Tim to keep pushing forward all this time were snapped, his muscles heavy and aching and entirely unwilling to move. He slumped back into the cushions and waited for a moment for his vision to stop swimming.

"Gosh. Maybe I could lay down? I really am tired. But," Tim's heart rate spiked as Bruce moved to relinquish the couch to him, "Don't go, please? I don't want to—I mean—"

But Batman fixed him with that calm, steady gaze and understood at once.

"Take as long as you need." A warm, calloused hand ruffled Tim's hair. "I'll be right here when you wake up."

And you know?

Tim believed him.

Chapter End Notes

The response to this fic has been unbelievable. The subject matter is of an incredibly personal nature and I was honestly worried about how it would be received.

Reading all the wonderful comments from people who found comfort in this story meant the world to me. I cried reading some of them.

This is my third ever real fic, and my first proper multi-chapter story. The love and support I've received from the beautiful people in this fandom has absolutely taken my breath away.

Thank you, thank you, thank you SO MUCH for reading!
If you had fun, leave a comment! Let me know!

You can find me on tumblr at eggmacguffin!

Edit 4/21/23:

Here are some links to absolutely gorgeous fanart:

Chapter 2:

Tim crying on the train by whizradio:

www.tumblr.com/whizradio/679484085726527488/this-is-a-story-about-gaslighting-says-the?source=share

Tim and Jason reunion in the mountains by adelfie:
www.tumblr.com/adelfie/702910821006737408/comic-style-art-i-made-inspired-by-a-meditation?source=share

Chapter 4:

Tim and Jason on the train to Bludhaven by ky-landfill:
[www.tumblr.com/ky-landfill/700253886884249600?](http://www.tumblr.com/ky-landfill/700253886884249600?source=share)
source = share

Thank you so much! Your art is breathtaking and I'm glad you liked my story! <3

Works inspired by this one

[\[Podfic of\] A Meditation on Railroading](#) by
[Flowerparrish Pods \(Flowerparrish\)](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!